

Maybe Sprout Wings by eternalgoldfish

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Summary:

“There anything I can do for you, man?” he asked, and Billy could see slow recognition fill Steve's eyes, the second he put Billy's face together with the man who stood in front of him, taller and possibly broader than he was as a teenager, with hair cut short and shoulders squared. But Billy's grin was the same. His leather jacket was the same. When Billy ran his tongue over his teeth, stared Steve down, he felt some of that fire he had felt then, wasn't sure if he liked it.

“No,” Steve said.

“What?” Billy asked. “I haven't even said anything yet.”

“Exactly,” Steve said, snapping the laptop shut. If Billy looked closely, he could make out a scar creeping out of Harrington's hairline, the exact kind of scar a kitchen plate would leave.

“Isn’t this a tattoo shop?” Billy waved his hand around. “Don’t you take walk-ins?”

1. thought of old friends, the ones who'd gone missing

Evening slunk along the cracked streets of Chicago, chasing Billy's hair as he tucked his shoulders up around his ears. It was cold, for March, and wet, with a sort of slushy permanence that promised snow storms into late spring. Empty coke cans and loose news sheets rattled around in the gutters. A car honked as he jogged across the street, tight jeans straining as he stepped up on to the curb. At least the freezing rain had settled, even if it meant the sidewalks were made of ice.

He rubbed his sleeve over his lips and pulled out his phone. It must have been five, at least. No new messages. No WiFi signal. One missed call. He had no clue what time it was when he shoved his phone back in his pocket, but he told himself it didn't matter, took a deep breath and pushed through the glass door.

The tattoo shop was new, maybe only a month old at most. Billy had seen the for sale sign, and the sold sign, and the cardboard in the windows when people had started to go in and out, moving around walls, painting, probably putting in new flooring. He was pretty sure the unit used to be some kitschy flower shop that sold nothing but Venus fly traps and cacti, but he'd never really paid enough attention to be sure. One day the construction was just sort of finished. The cardboard in the windows was replaced with looping white script and an intricate mural of a giant, gangly monster floating over the city. A circular, purple open sign buzzed where a construction warning used to hang. Upside-Down Tattoos was built slowly, but seemingly popped into existence.

"Just a second," Someone called from the back. Billy shuffled his feet, resisted the urge to check his phone again. What time had the website said the shop closed, eight? It couldn't be later than five, maybe five thirty if time had slipped away from him. Time had been doing a lot of that lately, melting and slithering from under his feet when he closed his eyes.

He balled his fists in his jacket pockets and squinted at the art lining the walls, wondered if it was done by the artists, or if all tattoo shops belonged to slightly eclectic packrats. Prints and old photographs

hung in brass frames against every wall, each image tucked so closely to the next that it was like they were sharing secrets, the exposed bricks behind poking in and out like spying siblings. Someone had done another mural behind the front counter, this one of a beast with jagged teeth and human limbs, with a mouth split wide like a trillium. The bricks were painted a harsh white, but the lines of the beast were black and slick.

Kali's shop had a lot of art in it, but Billy mostly remembered pin-ups and taxidermy alligator claws. Her boss had a thing for geometric patterns and leather.

"Hey, sorry, just working on this rubber arm," the guy said, emerging from the back room and waving what was, in fact, an arm made of rubber. Billy stared. He'd known who worked at the shop, had found out from Instagram, but he'd believed the information with the sort of detached acceptance some people had for ghosts.

Steve Harrington, with wild hair pushed back by square glasses, ambled up to the counter and set the arm on the dark wood. He could have looked like the boy Billy had gone to school with, had tattoos not licked out from under his polo shirt, pressed into his arms and neck. He lazily opened the laptop behind the counter and poked at a few keys. The word *sick* looped across his knuckles in the same style as the sign on the shop front. Billy thought he saw roses in his elbow ditch.

Steve tapped at the computer a few more times before finally glancing up. "There anything I can do for you, man?" he asked, and Billy could see slow recognition fill his eyes, the second he put Billy's face together with the man who stood in front of him, taller and possibly broader than he was as a teenager, with hair cut short and shoulders squared. But Billy's grin was the same. His leather jacket was the same. When Billy ran his tongue over his teeth, stared Steve down, he felt some of that fire he had felt then, wasn't sure if he liked it.

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“Isn’t this a tattoo shop?” Billy waved his hand around. “Don’t you take walk-ins?”

High school hadn’t been the best time for Billy, even he was willing to admit that. He was too sloppy. Too bloodthirsty. Didn’t have an outlet or a filter or a purpose, or whatever other crap a TV therapist would have recommended had he sprawled out on their couch like a rotting whale.

“Not from you. How did you even find this place?”

“Wow, six years hasn’t changed you one bit,” Billy said, words going slow and eyes going wide. He remembered the shape of Harrington’s mouth when they’d play basketball, all hard lines and tight teeth.

“Shut up.”

He’d put that scar on Harrington’s forehead, one night when he was drunk and mad and his step-sister Max had refused to come home on time. She didn’t even know the kid who had been kidnapped, they’d lived in Hawkins for like two months, but she’d insisted on hanging out at his weird house anyway. The kid was home safe at that point, but he had weird episodes, the kind that made his whole family swarm to coddle him. Billy had never been coddled. He thought the whole deal was bullshit.

Max hadn’t wanted to come home. She’d wanted to spend time with her stupid friends and her stupid pre-teen boyfriend. Harrington had just been the wall between him and those punk-ass brats.

“I didn’t find this place,” Billy said, punctuating his sentence with scare quotes. “It’s along the street. It’s a tattoo shop. I want a tattoo. Just thought I’d check it out. But clearly business is booming and I’m not wanted, so whatever, have fun with your rubber arm.”

Steve sucked in a breath and glanced around, eyes obviously lingering over the empty leather arm chairs pressed against the

windows. There wasn't a single crease in the seats. Steve ran a hand over his face. The knuckles of his other hand said *home*.

"You know. Fuck, I did have a cancellation. Just- show me the stupid dragon or whatever you want so we can get this over with."

"A dragon?"

Steve raised his eyebrows and flexed his hand. "The number of guys who look like you who come in here looking for dragons is staggering. It's usually their first tattoo. On like, a shoulder or something."

"Isn't that kind of shitty to say about your clients?"

Steve rolled his eyes and twisted to push up his polo sleeve, the toothy creature on the wall behind him brought to life on his shoulder. "We're all hypocrites. Show me the fucking dragon."

Billy sneered. Why *had* he come here? But he pulled a crumpled piece of paper out of his pocket and shoved it over the counter. Steve wrinkled his nose and took the paper between both hands, smoothing it over the laptop before running his fingers over the pencil lines. He said, "So, not a dragon."

"Yeah, and not my first tattoo," Billy said. "I'm not some fucking cliché, Harrington."

Steve glanced at Billy's belt buckle, let his eyes roam real slow up the length of Billy's leather jacket and dangling earring, paused at his close fade and the curls piled on his forehead and said, "No. Never would have thought."

Billy licked his teeth. He knew the glance wasn't one of *those* glances, figured it would never be based on the scar on Steve's forehead, but it still built a slow flush in his belly. "Shut up. Are you going to do this for me, or what? I want it on my left arm."

Steve tapped the crude drawing of a boxer in front of him, lingered his finger over the word *resilient* scrawled in blocky letters on the top left-hand side of the page. "Are you picky about how similar to it this has to be? Because this drawing is fucking terrible, dude."

“Fuck off,” Billy said. “Just make it happen.”

Steve dropped his glasses down to his nose and ran a hand through his hair. “Cool. Sit down. I’ll be back in like, I don’t know, a bit. Flip the open sign, this’ll take until close. And don’t steal anything.”

It felt like literal decades before Steve shuffled back into the front room, a pencil eraser held between his teeth. Billy wondered if Steve still smoked, realized he didn’t really know if Steve smoked in high school, just that he’d heard things and thought he’d seen an ember or two flicked from Steve’s wrists in a parking lot or at a party. But maybe that was someone else’s hand he was thinking of. The parts he remembered of Steve were mostly snarls and blood.

“You said you’ve got other ink, right?” Steve asked, taking the pencil from his mouth. “Is this going to be placed near anything else?”

“Yeah, there’s one kind of close on my chest. The other’s on my knee,” Billy said.

Steve waved a hand in Billy’s general direction, pencil wagging. “Jacket off, then.”

“Geeze, the chicks told me you were smooth.” Billy grinned.

“Can it, Hargrove.”

Billy clicked his tongue but stood, shedding his jacket and dropping it on the couch. He hesitated with his hands on the hem of his shirt, licked his lips and winked, before pulling it over his head in time to miss Steve’s disgusted groan.

“Do you need a room?” Steve asked.

“Depends,” Billy said, dropping his t-shirt on top of his jacket as he fought the juvenile urge to flex. Something about people he went to high school with made him feel younger. More wild. At twenty four, six years ago felt centuries away. He slapped his knee. “Want to see the one here next?”

“No,” Steve said, but his eyes were on the anvil pressed into Billy’s peck, where it rested just under his collarbone. It was blackwork, just shy of realism, like the elephant peeking out of Steve’s open up-for-grabs book where it lay on the glass coffee table.

Steve stepped so close that Billy thought he could blow away the hair falling in his eyes, pencil caught between his teeth again until he said, “You know, this style is pretty close to mine. Finding it real hard to believe this was a coincidence.”

“Damn, you’ve figured it out. I get generic tattoos.”

Steve squinted, glanced at Billy’s eyes, shifted slightly, and headed back towards the work room. “I’m going to overcharge you and write ‘dicks’ for the script.”

“I’ll sue.”

“That’s why I get you to sign a waiver, dipshit.”

Billy closed his eyes and sighed into the vibrations on his arm, accepted their bite. He’d never liked pain, as much as his bruised knuckles might suggest otherwise – he’d never particularly cherished split lips or oozing gums -- but there was something sharp and clarifying about the hum of a tattoo machine, something transformative about hurt becoming creation. He could breathe through his nose, out through his mouth, and hiss the agony between his teeth.

Steve had Billy sitting on a surprisingly comfortable folding chair with his left arm draped over an unsurprisingly uncomfortable podium. He could feel the circulation stalling towards his hand, leaving it tingling and clumsy every time Steve twisted just the wrong way and bumped it with his knee. This close, their faces hardly a foot apart, Billy could see every one of Steve’s eyelashes, could spot the faint scars on Steve’s face from where he’d fallen in his childhood, been kicked in the face as a teen.

There was a slash of ripped white skin running down the left side of

Steve's nose, and Billy knew what the cartilage under that junction would feel like below his burning knuckles. He wondered how many people had noticed the old wound, sitting nose to nose with Steve's shitty hipster glasses and comical head light.

"So, why a boxer?" Steve asked.

Billy cracked an eye and said, "What's it matter to you?"

Steve pulled the machine back and shrugged, wiped down Billy's arm, and continued. "It doesn't. Chatting's just less awkward than me putting on *Love It or List It* and forcing you to watch with me for the next two hours."

The back area of the shop was an open room littered with work carts, rolling chairs and massage beds. Someone had drawn a giant mandala on the mirror that stretched the back wall. The wall to the left was covered in misshapen antlers and old photographs. Billy eyed the TV crammed into the corner and grimaced. "And if I don't want to watch that shit?"

"Then remember my offer and who's holding the tattoo machine."

Seconds rolled in to minutes that rolled into moments, and after Steve had wiped Billy's arm for the third time, he was apparently done listening to the machine vibrate along to his own poorly hummed rendition of *Uptown Funk*. He set the machine on his cart and started to remove a glove. "So, do you like Hillary or David more? Because honestly, I would almost always want to list my house after these renovations, they never solve the big problems with the house, just the dumb shit."

"I'm a professional boxer," Billy said, just as Steve was saying, "Like not having enough bedrooms. Who wants three kids in the same room?"

Steve paused and snapped his gloves back on. "Seriously, you couldn't just say that?"

Billy sneered. "This wasn't a social visit."

"Okay," Steve said, picking up the machine, "But your answer was

literally your occupation. Unless you're a secret professional boxer?"

"Will you shut up?"

Steve shook his head, wiped down Billy's arm with a little more force than felt strictly necessary. "Look, man, I just don't understand why you're here. You're like, not even on the long list of people I'd ever want to see again. No offense."

"God, make my heart melt."

"Fuck you, it's not like you like me either."

Billy sighed up at the ceiling and let his sights get lost to the swirling flecks speckling the tiles. "Like I said. This is a tattoo shop. I want a tattoo."

"Yeah, but you didn't have to stay when you saw it was me," Steve said. His wiping hand may have been hard, but his needle was steady and kind when he started on the next line. "There are tons of shops in this town."

"I was already here," Billy said, but he couldn't pull his eyes away from the photo just above the television, held snugly in a bronze frame of twisting vines.

"Bullshit," Steve said, like he didn't have a picture of Billy's sister in his shop.

This time, with Steve's machine held away, Billy shrugged. "I didn't want to leave. Is that so hard to believe?"

"Yes."

"Yeah, well," Billy stretched his neck. He sunk against the podium, let the weight of the evening cradle him. "Do you want to watch *Love It or List It*, or?"

Steve pushed up his glasses with his wrist, scoffed, and said, "David better have some fucking good houses to show us today."

“Oh my god,” Billy said, not even half an hour later. “Even your ringtone is annoying.”

Steve shut off his machine, set it on the table, and peeled off his gloves. “It’s probably Nance,” he said, as he rolled backwards on his office chair to grab his phone where it sat on the other end of the cart. Nancy always called on slow evenings, when she’d left the shop early and thought Steve might be spinning around in the back room by himself, listening to his list of depressing Nirvana songs.

“You’re back with Wheeler?” Billy asked, and Steve ignored the jolt the idea sent through his chest, the ancient pain he’d told himself he’d left behind somewhere at a college party when he was nineteen but had never actually gone to college. Back then, Nancy had wanted to be a real-estate agent and spent every weekend convincing Jonathan and Steve to drive miles and miles from Hawkins to sleep on her sorority couch and play beer pong. She’d told him in secret, two years in, that real-estate was a mistake. She thought it was fucking soulless.

“She’s still with Jonathan, we just own the shop together. With Carol.”

“Shit, you’re still talking to Carol?”

“I’m more surprised that you’re not, actually,” Steve said. He tapped at his phone screen a few times, told Jonathan not to worry about the hole they’d accidentally put in Steve’s apartment wall last week. They’d been drunk. Trying to rearrange the living room had seemed like a good idea, at the time.

Billy exhaled slowly and shook his head, earring twisting in the light. Steve had snapped fresh gloves on and was picking up the machine again by the time Billy said, “I had a pretty big fight with Tommy a few years back. He didn’t say?”

Steve brought the needle to Billy’s arm and leaned in close, said, “Honestly, I don’t talk to Tommy much. He mostly comes in looking for Carol. We just never jived again after senior year, you know? But Carol’s amazing. We bumped into each other at a convention just after I’d finished my apprenticeship and getting over all the old shit

was so easy. I'd always been closer to her than Tommy, anyway."

"Really?" Billy asked, like he'd never considered that, and Steve could see the way he rolled the idea around on his tongue, inside his mouth, like he was trying to break down the candy coating on an M&M. Had Billy always done that? Steve couldn't remember. He'd seen so much of Billy's tongue that he could only ever imagine it creeping out from Billy's lips and dipping hungrily down his chin.

Billy's body was art. Steve had known in high school, had seen Billy's muscled shoulders ripple as he washed suds from his hair. He remembered the way water would roll down Billy's chest and could recreate the tick in Billy's jaw—had recreated it on paper when people had argued with him that art couldn't be self-taught. Billy was an asshole, but Billy was, objectively, gorgeous.

"Yeah," Steve shrugged, wiping again. "Like, I was best friends with Tommy, don't get me wrong, but we were all pals before he started dating Carol. I didn't have to drop her too when he turned on me, which apparently backfired--" and his mind stalled, flipped, caught back up with the things leaving his mouth.

Billy laughed like it was fine, like there wasn't something dull behind his eyes, and Steve stretched his mouth to match, pulled his lips unnaturally wide like his words were swollen. "He was always a dick," Steve said, and Billy nodded.

"He was always a loser," Billy said.

"He's still a loser," Steve agreed, dipping into his ink cup. "The only thing he's got going for him is Carol."

Billy turned back to the TV, mouth set into a line Steve didn't understand, and Steve was starting to think that not knowing was better. Why the fuck did he want to know anything about Billy, anyway? Then Billy's phone started chirping. Steve's eyebrows crawled up to his head light.

"You're fucking kidding. You're giving me shit when *that's* your ringtone?"

Billy adjusted his arm. “*Psycho Killer* is a classic,” he said, and by the third time Billy had let his phone ring through the voicemail, Steve was starting to think it might also be an invitation.

“So, I got to ask, who did your other ink?” Steve said, half way through swirling the script. He’d done it in free hand, stretching the banner wide to fit in each clean letter with swoops and flourishes. His script was nowhere near as fierce as Nancy’s, who had taken to building complicated fonts until her wrists ached and her hands moved with phantom memory, but he’d practiced and practiced to turn his chicken scrawl into art.

Billy held his tongue a moment, using Steve wiping down his arm as an opportunity to wiggle his tingling fingers. “Kali Prasad. I don’t know if you’d have heard of her? We were buddies for a bit, but things went kind of sideways.”

Steve made a face. “Yeah, I know her. One of the shop guys is dating her sister.”

“Shit, really?”

“Yeah. Do you remember ever meeting Jane Hopper?” Steve asked, pointing to a picture on the wall. “The chief adopted her like, I don’t know, when we were seventeen? But Kali ran away from their foster family at some point. But I guess you know all that stuff.”

Billy nodded, but he still had that distant look on his face, the one Steve couldn’t understand, didn’t know how to unravel from the flat line of Billy’s mouth. His spare hand twitched like he itched to hold something and Steve remembered Billy leaning against his car on a cloudy Hawkins morning, spitting smoke into the sky. Billy said, “Apparently not enough stuff. Shit, a sister?” And Steve got a glimpse of maybe what that look might be. Felt the soft ache of it himself.

“Yeah, we call her Eleven. It’s kind of morbid, actually. Their foster family was pretty fucked up, tattooed it on her wrist. Apparently only called her it and home schooled her. She wants Will to cover it up with something, but hasn’t decided what yet.” Steve laughed, but the

context was misplaced and dry.

“I’ve seen it,” Billy said. “It’s something we- yeah, I’ve seen it. Kali’s, that is. Number eight. She’s still got it.”

And Billy’s tone was choked with something new, something more ragged, and Steve didn’t know where that aborted sentence went, wasn’t sure he wasn’t to know, was almost positive he was never going to find out.

He put his machine aside and wiped down Billy’s arm before lathering it in ointment. “Go look in the mirror,” he said. “Then I want some pictures for my portfolio. And Instagram. Do you want me to send them to you?”

“Steve,” Dustin said, wading through the massage beds and buzzing tattoo machines to reach Steve where he was bent over a woman’s thigh. “Steve. I’ve got a question. Well, okay, it’s like, maybe also kind of an accusation. But it’s going to sound like a question. Were you drinking in here last night, dude? Because I was looking through the books and it says Billy Hargrove was here.”

The client, a woman in her early twenties with jet black hair and what was probably a hickie on her neck, glanced at Steve with mild alarm, and Steve rolled his eyes. “Fuck off, dude,” Steve said. “I don’t do that stuff here, you know that. Billy was here, thanks. What’s that face for?” Steve waved his free hand. “Stop making that face.”

But Dustin’s mouth was gaping and his eyes just as wide. “Are you sure? Are you sure it wasn’t, like, some other Hargrove guy?”

Steve shrugged and wiped down the woman’s arm, brought the needle back to her skin. She was getting a kraken twisted around a ship and was one of those types who wanted to tell Steve her whole life story before he put a single line on paper, so he’d capture her vibe and spirit and press it into her skin. Honestly, Steve remembered something about an orca or a vacation, or maybe it was a wedding. He just thought the kraken was cool as shit.

“It was Billy, dude. He was actually pretty civil. Close your mouth, Jesus.”

Dustin shook his head. “It’s just strange, don’t you think? Even Max isn’t talking about him anymore, and Max was *obsessed* with him when he started boxing.”

And how Dustin knew what Billy was doing, how everyone knew what he was doing, somehow lodged a weird rock by Steve’s Adam’s apple, like he’d swallowed a peach pit. Old hatred had died young, when Steve had realized how fucked up he was in high school, how hungry he’d been to shove Billy back. Now he just felt cold, choked, like he’d missed a piece of the world that everyone else knew, that he would have caught if he hadn’t pushed Billy back, back into his mind, until Billy was nothing more than a rippling chest, a figment of reference to push him through his apprenticeship.

Will wheeled around in his chair to glance at Steve, something complicated on his face and he fussed with the plastic over his tattoo machine. He’d been shadowing Steve for four months, was picking up the craft faster than anyone Steve had ever met, and his haunted, wonder filled eyes still reminded Steve of that young kid who’d gone missing and turned up in the woods three months later, worse for wear but optimistic in a way Steve could never grapple, was never able to replicate in himself.

“What did he get?” Will asked.

“A boxer,” Steve said. “A twist on those popular American Traditional ones.”

Dustin groaned and headed back to his spot at the front desk. “He’s such a fucking cliché.”

Freezing rain slid down Steve’s windshield as he idled at a red light, wondered when his life had become a series of nighttime traffic lights and stop signs. Chicago was a big city. He told himself he could move closer, that rent was outrageous anywhere, that as soon as the shop started picking up traffic he’d have the funds to pay for something in

a more stylish neighbourhood, maybe with a balcony. But as he stared at the red light in front of him and watched the advanced left turn signal flash for the other direction, he let the idea sit in his gut.

His apartment had huge, industrial glass windows, the kind that made temperature control a bitch all year round. Everything was a little bit broken and a little bit grimy, but the exterior walls had that exposed brick look Nancy was always raving about, and even though Steve knew in his heart that those bricks made his heating bill even higher, he liked them.

Nancy and Jonathan were working on getting a townhouse to rent a few streets over from the shop. Steve turned left and checked his mirrors, turned the windshield wipers up. They wanted to start a family soon, had their wedding all planned out for the next month. It wasn't the happy suburban dream they'd all thought of in Hawkins, the one they were viciously trying to escape from the moment they realized that teenage rebellion could carry into adulthood, but it was something. Steve had thought about it too, at one point.

He thought of Billy in the shop with his haunted eyes and wondered if he had a family.

The rain in Chicago was always unforgiving. It fell heavy between the buildings and slipped off shop overhangs like glacial waterfalls, where it coated the streets in slick ice. Steve never risked rolling stops in this weather, didn't dream of it as his car skidded towards the next intersection. The streets were raucous, but inside his car there was only the ticking of his turn signal and the soft hum of the engine.

His commute was far longer than he wanted, but when he pulled into the underground parking garage of his building and the rain beating on the roof abruptly halted, leaving him in real silence, he knew he wasn't going to move.

Notes for the Chapter:

Wow, so, this took way longer to pull together than I meant it to, but I've got my fingers crossed for a chapter a week here on out.

Special thanks to demogrove for cheerleading, betaing, and generally helping me keep my shit together.

I've never written an AU before, and frankly I'm nervous as fuck, so I'd love to hear some feedback! Comments are always appreciated.

2. said all their names three times

Billy hissed in the hot water, grasped the shower handle with his soapy hand and yanked until it stopped burning his tender shoulder, still grit his teeth as he lifted his tattooed arm to keep it out of the spray. He reminded himself that his tattoo was a self-imposed hurt, one of the only raw patches he'd ever asked for in his long history of scraped elbows and carpet burns.

He leaned his back against the cool tiles and ignored the stray droplets of water gently rolling over his fresh skin, tilted his head back to stare at the stain in the ceiling from when his roof cracked and filed the apartment with murky rain water. His shower grout was browning between the off-green tiles. He needed to learn that trick his step-mother used to wash away blood.

Not that he was on speaking terms with his step-mother, not in years. He squinted at the ceiling and wondered how shower steam could feel the same as a bath, wrapped hot and wet around him. But the water, this time, was cold. He was cold. As he ran his fingers over the remaining soap on his body, letting the day wash down the drain, he pressed his back into tiles until the harsh grooves molded lines in to his skin.

At one point, he'd longed for a life without bruises, but that was far behind, left with a child who hid under beds and kept Spiderman bandaids in his backpack.

Billy licked his lips and turned off the tap. His tattoo was raw and red when he pat it dry with a paper towel, the swelling hardly better than the days before. The lack of goop was a notable improvement, but two days of keeping the skin out of water and without lotion meant the area was dry and tight, straining around his shifting muscles when he moved. His wound would dry out, wax over, peel off of him in swaths like low-grade tissue paper.

He reached for the lotion on the counter and kept his eyes low, off the fog on the mirror and shifting colours, his shredded knuckles, the bulk of his wide chest under yellowing lights. He traced what he could see of the boxer over his shoulder and used his guess as a guide

to apply the cream. His fingers were icy, but his arm was hot. People had always said he was warm blooded, hot headed, a bit of a firecracker.

One time he'd cracked a plate over Steve Harrington's head, so he guessed they were right about something, whatever it was.

A beer was always perfect in the low light of evening, when Billy had turned the lights off and his TV sprayed his deep blue walls with colour. Max had insisted he painted when he moved in, told him adding some character would make the place feel like home, but she'd picked the paint and suggested his leather couch, and while he'd worn the leather until it was soft, he'd never hung a single photograph.

This evening the TV splashed red and grey, some cop drama he couldn't see playing before his eyes as he stared out the window, beer tipped to his mouth but dead on his tongue. Kali once told him she thought he drank too much, but she could drink him under the table any day, so he figured it was bullshit. Tommy was a lightweight whose cheeks went blotchy and red after one beer, so he'd never made it passed his fourth. He was always dead asleep at the table. Pathetic. Not even sort of endearing.

Billy didn't know why he'd kept Tommy around, anyway, or Carol. Had it really been two years since they'd all sat at the same table? He hadn't thought about it. Not until Steve stopped being a ghost and yanked Hawkins up from the shitty grave Billy had dug it in his mind. Fuck. Six years out of high school?

He got up from the couch with a groan and kicked the corner of the coffee table as he tried to step around it, cursed Jesus and the apostles, done with their homoerotic undertones. His shin fucking *hurt*. *Motherfucker*.

But he wanted to see the street on the other side of his dusty apartment windows. When had he last cleaned them? He didn't fucking care. Probably never.

His phone rang and he turned back to the table, picked it up with a short, "What?"

"Billy," Scott said, "Sounding chipper as always."

"Cut the shit, Clarke," Billy said, setting his beer on the windowsill so he could run a hand through his hair. "It's like ten at night. What do you want?"

Scott coughed on the other side. Billy could hear shuffling. "Please, I knew you'd be up. And all that language."

"Clarke," Billy warned, couldn't help his rasp.

"Anyway," Scott said, "Just thought I'd say hi. I've booked you a fight in two months. Your suspension will be lifted by then, so I figured you'd want to get back in the ring."

Which was just fantastic, really. Billy bore his teeth like an animal, watched them glint back at him in his hazy window reflection. "And if I don't want it?"

"That's why I gave you two months," Scott said, sounding smug. "Lots of time to prepare. You should start working out again. It would be good for you."

And Billy tensed his busted knuckles, shifted his strained muscles. "I'll do that."

"Have you spoken to Max lately?"

"No."

"Well," Scott said, "You might want to give her a call."

Billy said, "I might," and hung up the phone, swapped it for his beer. He took a long gulp as whirled around, hitting the splitting punching bag dangling in the corner. If his tattoo stung and his knuckles came back with blood, he didn't fucking care.

On the sill, his phone rang and rang. *Psycho Killer. Qu'est-ce que c'est?*

Mike was such a fucking bitch. He had maybe three jobs. Maybe four if whining counted as a job. And one of those jobs, the simplest of those goddamn fucking jobs, was getting lattes for clients who needed a sugar boost. Or for the people in the shop in general. Or, like, for Steve, when he was having a shitty day and his car was making a weird rattling noise and his nine thirty appointment had cancelled at nine twenty-five, leaving him short a few hundred dollars and definitely in no position to put lattes on his credit card.

Fucking Mike. The Starbucks line seemed endless from Steve's position near the back, stuck behind a soccer mom with a screaming baby strapped to her chest. Steve narrowly avoided being smacked by her ponytail.

What were they even paying Mike for? Sitting at the front desk and looking pretty was not worth minimum wage. God-fucking-damn.

Steve ground his teeth and held his backpack tighter, trying to hold back his disdain for the blaring jazz music and brown-black colour scheme swirling around him. Some chick kept shouting, "Mobile order for Stacey!" Like Stacy was even a real person, and Steve understood why he needed his coffee, because he very rarely felt such unyielding contempt for someone he had never met before.

He needed some deep breaths, or more patience, or a venti doubleshot on ice with white mocha and coconut milk. He dodged the ponytail in front of him and shuffled forward in line, trying to find that inner zen he knew he could capture if he forced himself to concentrate on the warm, roasty coffee smell wafting from the burbling coffee makers. The jazz was more manageable when he could imagine his incredibly strong iced espresso at the end of the line. He'd need another cup of coffee to follow that. At this point, would take either a walk-in or a miracle to save his morning, but caffeine was going to have to do.

He shuffled forward again, checked his phone for emails, pushed up the sleeves of his jean jacket, far too aware of how hot it was growing in the busy coffee shop, how long the line ahead of him was. He

pulled on his collar and wished for the first time since October that he'd worn a lighter coat. Maybe he should have downloaded a news app and brought his reading glasses.

He checked his phone again and paused, catching considering blue eyes and a dangling earring in the reflection. "Harrington?" Billy asked, and Steve snapped his head around, some words he couldn't remember dying on his tongue. He hadn't seen Billy in years and somehow he was in the same neighbourhood, knew the same people, went to the same coffee shop. It was like Billy was a pop song he'd never noticed on the radio, haunting him after someone pointed it out. It was fucking surreal.

"What're you doing here?" Steve asked. Dimly, he knew it had been two weeks since he'd seen Billy, but time had a weird way of bending when he closed his eyes and listened to the rain.

Billy looked him over slowly, eyes dragging up Steve's chest in a way that made Steve's shoulders bunch, before saying, "Getting coffee? In a coffee shop? Am I special, or do you ask everyone in Chicago why they're doing something obvious in a place where it's obvious?"

"Shut up," Steve said, biting back his flustered venom. "I just haven't seen you around before."

"I usually remember to make my own coffee," Billy said, shrugged. "The coffee they have here ranges from pretty good to terrible. I like consistency."

"I just always get the dark roast," Steve said. "Or like, a latte or something."

Billy made a face and stuffed his hands into his jacket pockets, licked his teeth slow. There was the mean streak Steve remembered, the tick in Billy's jaw. "So you don't know shit about coffee?" Billy asked, but the playfulness in his tone was new, tilted his words in a way Steve would have remembered.

"Says the guy who makes his coffee at home."

"I like the coffee I make at home. It's consistent. It's strong. Not like

all these things,” Billy said, waving his hand. “Pike and Veranda are crap. Super acidic and watery. And they change the dark roast every week, so you never know if you’re getting, like a nice smooth roast or some burnt to shit French roast.”

“French?” Steve asked. Coffee was coffee. It filled the void. It kept his hands steady, kept his headaches at bay, stopped him from vibrating beside a client like one of those rip-cord tops.

“It smells like fish,” Billy said, as if that would somehow help how overwhelmed Steve felt by the conversation. The Billy in Steve’s mind didn’t give a fuck about coffee. The Billy in Steve’s mind didn’t really give a fuck about anything.

“Right,” Steve said. “Coffee smells like coffee.”

“Well, French smells like fish,” Billy said. “I’ve had it like, once, but it was disgusting. I only come here when I forget or when my coffee maker is busted.”

“I’m not usually here either,” Steve admitted, waving his phone a little in Billy’s direction. “My client dipped out this morning, so I got nominated for the coffee run.”

“How’s the shop going?” Billy asked, and Steve couldn’t tell if the interest was genuine or if Billy was feeling the heat as much as he was, delirious with the smell of coffee and Stacey still forgetting her fucking latte.

“Pretty good,” Steve shrugged. “You know, in general. How’s your arm healing? Can I see it?”

Billy grinned, all teeth and wagging tongue, and said, “You just always want me to take my shirt off, huh?”

So Steve looked Billy in the eyes, knew the weight of his words and said, “Don’t get too turned on. People might think we like each other.”

But Billy just shook his head and glanced at the slowly moving line in front of them, as if weighing how much time they had. If the man rapidly talking to a horrified looking barista at the front register

meant anything, it was probably going to be a while. Billy seemed to come to the same conclusion.

“Here,” He said, before shrugging out of his jacket and handing it over. Steve juggled the leather around his backpack. Billy wore a tight white shirt that looked soft to the touch and stretched over his shoulders when he pulled up his sleeve.

The tattoo was almost healed, save for a few flaking spots and places where the skin still looked fresh, but no longer raw. Steve found himself leaning in for a better look, grimacing against his better judgement. His lines could have been smoother in some areas. He forgot to finish one of the tattoos he’d put on the boxer’s arm, although with the angle it was at it was unlikely anyone else would notice.

“What’s that face for?” Billy asked.

Steve reached for Billy’s arm without asking, awkwardly holding all of their possessions with the other as he traced a finger along the outer edge of his design. If Billy’s breath caught, Steve politely pretended it was the hiss of one of the machines. “I gave him two noses,” Steve said, before glancing up to Billy’s eyes.

Billy had probably never looked so horrified in his goddamn life.

“Jesus,” Steve said, laugh choking his tongue. “I’m just fucking with you. It’s fine. It’s healed really well. You won’t even need any touch ups.”

“You’re fucking terrible,” Billy said, flexing his arms with what was probably anger, and Steve was suddenly aware of his hand curled around Billy’s bicep, their faces a foot apart, and the angry cough coming from the man behind them who was very nearly ready to stomp right passed and take the next spot in line.

Billy still had some of those rare freckles Steve remembered, faint, but burned into his face by the love of a thousand California suns. Billy said, “Are you ordering your coffee, Harrington, or are you going to feel me up all day?” And Steve dropped Billy’s arm like it was one of those suns, like he’d trapped their heat under his skin.

It was way too fucking hot for Steve's jean jacket in this coffee shop, Jesus Christ. He shoved Billy's jacket back to him and caught up with the line.

"Upside-Down Tattoos," Steve said, half yawning as he leaned against the front counter with his reading glasses slipping down his nose and the phone pressed between his shoulder and his ear. "What can I do for you?"

It was just after one, Mike was out to lunch, and Steve had spent the better part of the last fifteen minutes seeing if he could balance a pencil on his glasses. Early afternoon sun poked through the city buildings and filtered through the front window, painting the room in the lines of a beast. It was a little uncomfortable, watching flailing limbs creep from the window on to the hard wood, pressing back, back in to the shop until the whole space was filled with undeniable *presence*. But Will had suggested they put the Mind-Flayer on the shop front. He'd drawn the reference image, picked the colours, and none of them had ever been very good at saying no to Will. Not in years.

"I'd like to make an appointment with Steve Harrington?" The voice on the other side asked. There was something about it that felt familiar, but Steve wasn't sure, couldn't make out what it was through the static on the line.

Steve pushed his glasses back in place and sat up straighter. He opened his booking calendar on the computer and said, "Well, you're in luck. What can I do for you, man?"

The voice on the other side paused, seemed to consider, and slowly exhaled. "Hey, it's Billy. Billy Hargrove?" Billy said, and Steve checked the calendar, then the clock. It had only been a few hours. Fucking surreal.

"Hey," Steve said, swivelling his chair. "Miss me already?"

"Shit, pretty boy, turn it down," Billy said, something dangerous but playful in his tone. Maybe the danger was just Billy, maybe Steve had

conflated the two. "I'm going to start thinking you're flirting with me."

"Don't get too excited. I flirt with all the regulars," Steve said, shrugged, realized he was alone. "Is this a business call, or are you really here for little old me?"

"Business," Billy confirmed.

Steve sighed and said, "It's never for me. Okay, I've got openings all over the place for the next few weeks. What're you looking to get?"

There was shuffling on the other side of the line. Wind rushed and ruffled, something slammed. Steve thought he could hear a lighter click, but maybe he was projecting. Maybe he just wanted to slip into the cool afternoon and feel heat in his lungs, cold brick on his back. Billy finally said, "I'm looking to get praying hands on my leg. Skeleton ones. By my knee."

Steve tapped a pencil against his chin before scribbling down the idea. He typed Billy's name into a calendar entry. "Are you *sure* you aren't looking for a reason to take your pants off for me?"

When Billy slipped into the shop a week later, sunglasses high on his nose in rainy early April, Steve already had his machine ready and waiting, ink cups filled and *House Hunters International* ready to go.

"Do other people actually work here?" Billy asked as he took off his jacket and glanced around. The sun was setting later as spring crept in, pale late afternoon light washing everything in the shop front gray. Steve wondered if he should be more cautious around a man with solid fists and sharp teeth, but if Billy was going to kill him, it would have been years ago.

"You've just got really great timing," Steve said, leaning around an unloved armchair to flip the open sign over. "No one else had appointments so they went home. And lucky you, yours is my last one for the day."

Billy set his jacket down on the arm of the couch and rest his

sunglasses on top. "Then just tell me where to strip," he said, wide grin gracing his mouth as he licked his lips. Steve traced Billy's tongue with his eyes, tried not to think about how nervous that mouth had made him as a teenager. Billy had always been unnerving. Something about his eyes.

Ten minutes into a nice couple from Minnesota trying to find their perfect Hawaiian beach condo, Billy groaned and asked, "How did you end up working with Wheeler, anyway?"

Steve wiped Billy's leg and shrugged. Billy lay on his back with his nose tipped to the roof. Rain beat quietly on the front window in the other room, dwarfed by the buzzing machine in Steve's hand and the hum of the TV. "It's kind of a long story," Steve said, and when Billy gestured at the empty shop, he groaned. "Okay, well, the short version is that we're friends, and when I failed to get into college I got an apprenticeship. And she did get in to college and hated it, so she also got one."

"And then you didn't get married or have babies?" Billy prodded. If Steve were a less moral person, he'd punch his client in the teeth.

Instead, he pushed his glasses up with his wrist and continued working. "Nah, man, I mean, she's still with Jonathan. It's just convenient that we went into the same field. Art's always kind of held our friends together, you know? Like, even Jonathan's little brother is an apprentice here. You remember Will?"

Billy nodded like he had met Will, or like he remembered Will, or like he'd maybe known Will vaguely as a concept, and that was enough for Steve, because the majority of Hawkins only remembered Will as a concept. He was the boy with haunted eyes, the one who was kidnapped and found wandering the woods weeks later, wide-eyed and streaked with mud.

"That's the other thing I don't get though, like," Billy said, shifted on the massage bed. "You and Wheeler are all close and shit with her brother and his friends. But I didn't care at all about Max's little pals." And they both knew that was a lie, remembered Billy

screaming in Lucas's face as he chased the kid into a stranger's house with bared fists.

Steve cleared his throat and said, "It was different once Will got kidnapped. I just happened to be dating Nancy. She wasn't all that close with Mike before. We didn't even really know Jonathan or Will either."

"It just seems weird, is all."

"You would think friendship was weird," Steve muttered. He knew it was the wrong thing to say, but the bitter satisfaction felt sweet on his tongue. He'd never gotten over his phantom desire to bite Billy back.

Billy's brows were pinched and his eyes dark. He wiped his mouth with the back of his hand. "You, hanging out with a bunch of thirteen year olds? Yeah, it was fucking weird."

"Okay, well, that was a whole other thing," Steve said, dipping his machine before starting the next line. "I helped Jonathan and Nance try to lure the kidnapper at one point. Which, yeah, was stupid as shit. And actually, I wasn't really invited to help, I was just at the wrong place at the right time. And the guy came, and he attacked, and it was rough, you know? But he got away. And I still don't really know what Jonathan or Nancy expected from it, but it kind of lumped me with the problems the Byer's were having.

"Then Will starts drawing all these things," Steve said, gesturing to his arm and the windows at the front. He wiped down Billy's arm and continued, "The doctors say it's how he coped with the stress, or something. Made it something he could understand. I don't know, he was like, twelve. But the kids were all worried about him, and Nancy was busy looking after Jonathan and his mom, so the kids got left to me a lot. And they're cool, you know? So it worked out."

Billed nodded like he understood, but Steve wasn't so sure. It was a lot of information to swallow—a lot of information to tell. Steve wasn't sure what he thought telling Billy would accomplish or why his words were tripping each other to escape his mouth, but maybe it was dark nostalgia, the determination to rekindle old feelings. Or

maybe Hawkins was still burning through his veins, trying to find one more person who remembered its name.

“So Will drew your first tattoo?” Billy asked.

Steve needed a moment to backtrack and adjust his head light. He said, “Sort of. He drew the concept for it. He calls it a Demogorgon, which is this like, a Dungeons and Dragons monster?”

“That’s a real game? I thought that was like, a TV thing.”

Steve rolled his eyes. “Yeah, it’s a real thing. All the kids were really in to it when they were younger. It’s how they understood a lot of the situation, I think. Mind-Flayers and Demogorgons were easier to describe, and Will saw them in his nightmares, so he needed that tether. What he draws aren’t the actual monsters, though. They look completely different in the books.”

Billy blinked at the ceiling. “You say actual like they’re real,” he said, tongue caught between his teeth.

Steve shrugged, wiped Billy’s arm. “They’re real enough. To them.”

Billy looked at the mirror on the back wall, lost his eyes somewhere along the twisting mandala. “Yeah, well, they’re not kids anymore. They’ve got to face shit.”

This close, with Steve crouched over Billy’s thigh, Steve could see every ripple of muscle in Billy’s thick legs, every twitch and shiver as Steve pulled lines of ink across his skin. Billy was restless as he sat, unsure if he wanted to lie down or prop up, like he had to choose between Steve or the sky.

“If you move one more time, I swear to god,” Steve said, glancing up in time to meet Billy’s eyes, which were blue as robin eggs but red rimmed like wine. Steve wiped the rushing blood from Billy’s thigh.

Billy shrugged and said, “Sorry, I’m not really in to HGTV.”

And Steve looked at his rag, looked at Billy’s blood, looked Billy in

the eyes and knew, with undying clarity, that, “You’re hung over, aren’t you?”

Billy squinted and ran a hand through his hair, the blonde curls tumbling back limp and greasy. “Shut up,” he said, but there was warning in the curve of his mouth, anger that didn’t quite meet his eyes.

“You are,” Steve accused again, pointing with his machine. He quickly turned it off. “Dude, Kali never tell you not to drink before sitting?”

“Like you’ve never gotten a tattoo hungover,” Billy said, the last word a sharp snap in the empty shop.

“You already know I’m a hypocrite,” Steve said, pointing at his own chest. “But that doesn’t mean you have to be. This can mess up your healing. I charge for touch ups.”

Billy shuffled a bit, winced when it pulled his knee a bad way. “Just shut up. Shit, you’re not my mom or something. I won’t drink before next time, alright?” Billy said, and it was phrased like a question, but Steve knew he didn’t want an answer.

“So Steve,” Nancy said, sitting down backwards on a rolling chair and handing him a beer. The shop had been closed for the better part of an hour, undergoing a much needed deep clean, and Steve was more than happy to be done. Her tone, however, had him suspiciously reaching for his drink from his place on own chair, nervous smile on his lips. “We’ve been talking.”

There it was. “That’s never good,” Steve said, beer bottle held near his bottom lip.

Nancy grinned into her own drink and took a sip. She said, “We’re worried about your love life.”

Which was possibly the most unsurprising and most horrible thing that had come from Nancy’s mouth in the last three years. Steve bit his cheek and gulped his beer, shaking his head as he swallowed.

“Don’t you guys have like, literally anything else to talk about?”

“No,” Mike said, flopping on to an open massage bed. “We’re in relationships. Our love lives are boring.”

“Speak for yourself,” Carol said, pushing Mike aside enough to steal half of his table. “My love life is *fantastic*. We’re just worried about you, Stevie.” She pat Steve’s arm. “You haven’t been laid in like, what, a century?”

A thousand tired excuses swirled in his mind at once, tripping over one another to be the one he used this time. He was too busy for a relationship. He worked too much, was too tired. His heart was still healing from a wound six years old. His last seven attempts at dates had all ended with break up texts from women he thought he liked. He wanted to put his career first. What came out of his mouth was, “I just don’t know, guys, I don’t think it’s a big deal.”

Mike rolled his eyes. “Told you he’d say that.”

“Told you he’d say what?” Dustin asked, walking in from the front room with a beer of his own. His mouth dropped in incomparable glee. “Shit, you guys started without me? Steve, buddy, we’ve got to get you a girlfriend. You’ve gotten all mopey, you know? It’s just. It’s real depressing. It brings the whole place down. Clients are going to start complaining.”

Steve rubbed his brow, because when had that ever mattered? People never came back to complain. They didn’t even have a single negative review online. In fact, their only review was from Dustin’s mom, and it was the most sparkling piece of bullshit Steve had ever read.

“Look, guys, thanks, but finding someone really isn’t that easy. And I’m happy, you know?” Steve said.

Nancy sat up straighter, nearly choking on her sip of beer as she waved the bottle in the air. “Maybe you just need to expand your dating pool. What about guys? I know about that Zac Efron poster you used to have in your closet.”

And while Steve looked like he'd never been more betrayed in his entire life, he could admit that there was maybe a bit of truth in that statement. He may have had that poster. There may have been a phase in his teenage years where he'd had dreams about touching Efron's soft hair and kissing his plush lips, where he'd wondered if Efron's skin tasted like surf and sun or if his golden skin was a manufactured spray tan.

There was another mouth he had thought of for a time, after Nancy had left, that had caught Steve's eye, a mouth with full lips and a razor tongue, set with teeth like bright seashells. That boy also had sunkissed skin, but Steve knew better than to think about the taste.

He thought of Billy's dangling earring in his tattoo shop, remembered the long line of Billy's neck staring at the ceiling three days ago, and shook his head.

"I'm pretty sure everyone had a Zac Efron phase," Steve said, tipping his head for a sip of beer and pointing with his pinkie. "Don't think I forget your entire fucking *shrine*."

Notes for the Chapter:

A Starbucks doubleshot on ice is misleading. A venti is actually five shots of espresso.

Thank you all for reading. I'm having an absolute blast writing this and I'm glad to have you aboard.

Extra huge love for Demogrove and Uncaringerinn.

As always, I'd love to hear what you're thinking, and I'll see you next chapter.

3. phantoms in the early dark

Billy kept his elbows in, his fists high. He knew when to duck and when to swing, how to hold himself in a fight, liked to savour the burn in his muscles when he landed a punch. There was a fizz in his heart, New Years cracker sharp, electric in his bones, that buzzed through his sternum, made his chest feel a little like it was dying. It was like screaming. It was like church.

He was in his living room, knuckles wrapped to hell, hitting bag without his gloves, over and over and over, until he got it all out, until he was shaking from something new. His blood sang like a caged tiger, but it was a bitter thing, wheezing with blood in its mouth, teeth chipped.

His ribs were still a bit bruised. His concussion was gone. The fracture in his shin was gone and had been mild, but it had hurt like the devil and split pain up his leg with every step. It was no surprise that he was benched, but he just had to be a jackass, had to be the meanest person in the room, and he thought he'd grown out of that when he started fighting for money. He thought he'd learned to control that tiger.

What hurt the most wasn't the fracture or his pulsing head, it was his ability to kick himself when he was already fucking down. That's what rolled his gut, made him see red like the blood seeping through the wraps on his knuckles. Clarke thought he should train. Clarke was right.

He leaned back on his bad leg, shifted his foot as he swung his fist. The bite from the fracture was a slithering phantom that crawled up his throat, psychosomatic now. He'd lost track of time since his last fight. Everything had slipped.

He'd grown fond of the ghosts moving through his life, found them more appealing in his foggy bathroom mirror, where he could trace their outlines more than the shadows under his eyes.

With one hard hit he felt a knuckle split under the wrappings, gasped. Clarke told him to train, but he didn't need to. Billy would be

ready.

When Billy unwrapped his hands, he turned the deep kitchen sink on cold and put his fists under the steady tap. He watched the white subway tiles lining his galley kitchen until his knuckles felt frigid and arthritic. Max had picked the tiles like she'd picked the paint, because she wanted the place to look modern.

"You can entertain in a space like this," she had said, "You know, host parties or Christmas dinners or whatever. A home isn't just a place to sleep, dude. You can't just have, like, playboy posters on the walls and gym socks everywhere." But Billy hadn't owned playboys in a long time, hadn't seen the need, between bars and the internet, and he didn't entertain. He wasn't that type.

He put ointment on his fingers and lotion on his praying tattoo, pausing over the raised, healing bones. He had six missed calls and two new messages, cleared the alerts and set the phone on his bedside table. Maybe tomorrow.

The shop was warm in the late morning, the large glass windows in the front heating the building in a way that traveled all the way to the farthest mirror. Billy had his eyes shut and his head tipped back, tongue held between his teeth as the needle buzzed over his skin, sewing ink through his elbow ditch to hide his arteries. He tried to ignore his aching head, drawing the pain from the pulsing behind his left temple to the blood collecting on his arm. He didn't know which was worse, his head, or the mandala.

"Don't think about it too much," he heard Will say. It was weird to be in the shop with so many familiar faces, so many ghosts, but he supposed his luck had to run out eventually.

"It hurts," the woman in Will's chair replied. Billy had seen her face, her short curly hair, the number eleven stamped into her forearm in the same typeface he knew so well, soulless, bleak under Will's bright lamp. Jane. Eleven. Kali's mystery sister.

Billy grit his teeth and kept his mind on the needle chewing over his arm, inviting blooming bruises and rebirth. Carol was blasting K.Flay over the hum of the machines, drowning out *Property Brothers* on the TV. Billy hadn't actually *seen* Carol, but he knew it was her, the same way he knew Steve had won the TV bid from the way Steve glanced at the screen with a soft grin while Will grimaced. It was around then that the music had gotten loud.

"Well yeah, we told you it does," Lucas said. Billy hadn't said a word to him, hadn't expected his sister's boyfriend to be in the shop in the flesh, even with Max's pictures hanging on the wall, even with their youth plastered in every corner. Nancy had Lucas on his stomach with wild lines drawn all over his back, the blueprint for words Billy couldn't decipher, wasn't willing to look long enough to read. He'd caught Lucas's glance for just a second and stared back with matching dinner-plate eyes. He'd kept them closed since. Lucas's look wasn't worth Steve's smiles.

The only thing about Nancy Billy recognized was the pinch of her eyebrows and her sour cupid's bow. She had flowers and geometric shapes wrapped around her arms and neck, immortal in her skin, and Billy shouldn't have been nearly as surprised. She'd always had gumption, even if she looked like she went to Sunday school.

"You wanted it to be bitchin'," Steve said, pulling his machine back to wipe at Billy's arm, the paper towel a brief balm. "Well, that means it's going to hurt like a bitch."

"Amen," Billy said, before he could keep the words from slipping through his grit teeth.

The pause in the room was obvious, before Jane laughed. Billy tilted his head and cracked an eye as she said, "Worth it. Flowers are pretty." But she wasn't looking at Will or the chrysanthemum stenciled on her arm, she was looking at Billy, pleased smile on her face, and Billy was certain that he'd never met her before, definitely not in Hawkins. He'd remember a speech pattern like that, or a face. He'd never run in to Kali in Hawkins either, although he knew she had lived there. She'd told him it was hell. She wasn't wrong.

Steve wasn't smiling as he wiped down Billy's arm again. "Jesus," he

said, and Billy knew he had been caught. Wondered if he'd wanted to be. "You were drinking again. Dude, come on."

"It's fine," Billy said. "I had some beer last night, okay? I'm an adult. It's not like one of those Rugrats is the one with a hangover. You don't need to be in mom-mode for me."

"*One*," Steve said, at the same time Lucas said, "We're twenty!"

Steve ran a hand over his face and cursed before putting down the machine to strip his gloves. His words were punctuated by rubbery snaps as he said, "*Two*, I don't have a 'mom-mode,' it's called giving a shit. You've got a way higher chance of the ink falling out if your blood is gushing all over the place."

"I wasn't thinking about it, alright?" Billy said, eyes on the ceiling. "Fuck, can someone tell Carol to turn this shit down? It's like a sledgehammer smashing around in here."

He almost missed the look the others gave him. Steve paused half way through pulling on his second fresh glove. Loud enough to make Billy wince, he shouted, "Carol! The music is too loud!" Before pushing his glasses up his nose with his wrist. Billy had never looked at Steve's hands so much. Missed opportunities.

The music lowered until it no longer made his ears ring, but knowing Carol really was there, instead of the nebulous, half-baked way he knew before, made his stomach turn for whole new reasons as venom crawled up his throat.

"Does she have any clients booked today?" Billy asked, and Steve nodded, without having to ask who Billy meant, as he started pulling the next line on Billy's arm. Billy sucked in a sharp breath, pretended it was from the pain.

"She's got one after lunch," Steve elaborated. "I think she's mostly working on designs and doing walks-ins right now. And getting the lunch run? We've been talking about burritos." He paused. "She'll be leaving soon, actually. Do you want one?"

Which made Billy pause, because yeah, everyone in the shop knew

each other, it made sense that they would want to get lunch, but Billy didn't know what to do with it. He spotted the picture of Max grinning above the TV and said, "Sure?"

Steve adjusted the wires attached to his machine and called, "Carol, add a burrito for Billy!"

Carol squinted at Billy as she handed him his lunch, which Billy thought was fair. His arm was half done, wrapped up for a moment so Steve could eat. He'd left Billy kicking his legs as he sat on a massage bed in the back room, alone as the others bustled around in the front.

"Thanks," Billy said, and Carol scrunched her nose how she used to when she would whine about the freaks of Hawkins. It wasn't the first time Billy had seen that look sent his way, but it still panged somewhere below his ribs. Maybe food would fill it up. He unwrapped his burrito and took a bite.

"Why are you here, Billy?" She asked.

Billy rolled his eyes and said, "Why does everyone keep asking me that? It's a tattoo shop." He waved at his arm as if to make his point.

Carol didn't buy it for a second. She had always been the clever one, the one who knew how people worked. She wasn't book smart, not the way Billy could be, but she knew shit he could never figure out, could solve problems and make mean plans lickity split. In their youth, he'd admired that. Now it made him feel old, and he was too young for that crap.

"Do you think I'm stupid?" She asked. "You were always obsessed with Steve. Then you pulled all that shit with Tommy, stopped talking to us, and show up now?"

"I was just curious," Billy said. "You set up shop in my neighbourhood and I'm not supposed to poke my head in?"

Carol heaved an icy laugh. "The city is really fucking big, Billy. I don't even know where you live anymore. This wasn't some *sign* or us

looking for an apology.”

“Well, I’m here with one,” Billy snapped, and it wasn’t what he intended to say, he wasn’t even sure what he meant. The idea stung his tongue, made his swollen head beat with his heart, but he was swimming in his words now and had to learn to tread water fast.

“Well, save it,” Carol said. She took a vicious bite of her burrito and waved a hand in his direction. “I said I was done with you and I meant it. You can’t treat people like shit and then expect them to think you’ve changed.”

“I’m sorry,” Billy said, squeezing his burrito.

“No, you’re not,” Carol frowned. “You nearly bit Tommy’s head off. Over one comment.”

“He knows not to talk about my dad-”

“That’s not an excuse,” Carol hissed. “You just—attack people. And you can’t do that. That’s not okay. We were some of the only friends you had left, you asshat.”

And Billy didn’t know what to say to that, knew she was right that same way he knew she was the one playing K.Flay.

Carol didn’t say another word, and when they’d finished their burritos, she got up and threw out the wrappers. “Leave Steve alone,” she said. She pointed a finger when he opened his mouth. “No, shut up. I know that’s why you’re here. You think you can fix some friendship. If you fuck up with him like you did with Kali and Axel, you’re going to be the one who winds up in a wheel chair. Not him.”

“What did Carol say?” Steve asked as Billy counted out bills.

Billy shrugged and stacked his twenties in neat hundreds, nearly ready to hand them over. “Just old stuff. She wanted to know what I’d been up to. I wanted to know how Tommy was.”

“He’s just puttering around, mostly. Has some data entry job,” Steve

said. Billy's teeth said he was lying, but his eyes pleaded not to ask, so Steve shrugged, acted natural, ignored his instincts as he folded his arms in front of his chest and chased the looping lines of the roses on his arm with his thumb.

Billy nodded. "Yeah, that's more or less what she told me. He was already doing some of that when I knew him. It's weird that he's the only one of us that got a desk job, huh?"

"Oh my god, I know," Steve agreed. "I thought he'd be working at a supermarket or something."

"I can hear you!" Carol called from the back room.

"It's a respectable profession!" Steve called back, half-laughing.

When he turned back, Billy was laughing deep and low, the kind of laugh that made him tilt his head and push back his shoulders. Steve was caught on his smile, nearly stalled until Billy met his eyes.

"Got all four hundred?" Steve asked.

Billy kept his gaze steady but nodded. "Yup. Four hundred, plus an extra forty for your pocket."

"Handsome and a good tipper," Steve joked. "You can come back any time."

Billy winked, but it was weak, his grin softening until it no longer reached his eyes. He handed Steve the money, their fingers brushing and pausing in the middle. For a second, Steve thought he saw something on Billy's face, something hopeful and unreadable, but it was gone in the same second, twisting into Billy's pinched eyebrows.

"Hey," Billy said, hand lingering, "You know that picture you've got of Max? Over the Tv? Can I have it?"

Steve wasn't sure what he'd been expecting, but the quiet in Billy's voice shook a forgotten part of his chest, reminded it to beat with the rest of Steve's heart. Steve nodded slowly and took back his hand. "Yeah, dude, of course."

The bar was thick with bodies milling around dimly lit tables, young people screaming at each other over the loud thrumming of a folky cover band on the far side of the room. Steve swung his keys around his finger and caught them in his hand, eyes roving around the space as Jonathan laughed at his side. Will and Lucas glanced around behind them, painfully obvious about how fake their IDs were. The other guys were still sweet talking the bouncer at the door and Steve was adopting a religion in the hopes they'd get in. It wasn't the first time they'd snuck the kids in to a bar with loose morals, but tonight was important.

Jonathan wanted to keep his stag small, but Steve had insisted they at least go out for drinks, make the night one of their nights to remember, preferably without any holes in his living room wall or beer spilled on his new gray couch.

Steve tried to keep the weight of the evening out of his throat, let the pleasant hum of whisky in his veins keep his mind level. Nancy would be married tomorrow. Steve was trying to be the greatest best man he could fucking be, even if he was drowning, lungs waterlogged from predrinking and something more nervous.

Tommy clapped Jonathan on the back and grinned. "Here's to your last night of freedom."

"Ugh," Dustin said, walking up behind them as he shrugged off his jacket. "You're all fucking clichés."

"Shut up," Tommy said. Steve didn't think Tommy would show up, but apparently he'd miscalculated how serious Tommy was about booze and party in the same sentence, even if their party was nothing exciting. "After this he's hitched forever. You have to make out with some chick you'll never see again- maybe we should go to a strip club?"

"Who invited him?" Dustin asked.

Steve shrugged. The answer was Carol, but Steve wasn't going to be the one to crack open that jar. It looked better if they had adult

friends. Even if that adult friend was Tommy. “Strippers aren’t really our thing? But man, I hear this place has like, chicks that dance on the bar after midnight?”

Tommy nodded like that was reasonable, which Steve supposed he should count as a win. “Fine,” Tommy said. “But we’re getting fucking *hammered*, then.”

Steve felt that on a spiritual level. He flexed his fingers, took in the stale beer smell and low ceiling, and said, “Round one is on me.”

Jonathan grinned.

“So anyway, this guy comes at me with his gloves up and kisses me right on the mouth,” A man said, and Steve could swear he knew that voice, thought it was wishful thinking until he turned enough to spot Billy down the bar, talking to a man with a thick, bushy beard and a woman who looked like she’d walked out of *Alternative Press*.

Steve frowned into his rum, swirled the glass so the ice cubes jangled together, even though he couldn’t hear them over a slow, acoustic cover of *Hotline Bling*. He took a long sip before he hopped off his chair and pushed through the gaggle of men crowding the bar between him and Billy, until he was able to slip onto the empty stool at Billy’s side and signal the bartender.

Billy was laughing with his beer near his mouth, licked his lips before continuing, “It caused waves, you know? It’s a real masculine sport. And the guy was trying to fuck with me, but it looked sort of romantic to the crowd, I guess. There are gifs of it. But it was the middle of a fight. I nearly knocked his teeth out for it.”

“I saw that fight,” The woman said, “It was good shit.”

“Yeah, well,” Billy shrugged. “I was pretty murderous, you know?”

Steve could imagine it, remembered the fire in Billy’s eyes in the Byer’s kitchen, the feel of Billy’s thighs around Steve’s waist before the first hit connected. Imagination was blurred with memory, but Steve could connect the dots, could see Billy’s indignation, the tick in

Billy's jaw as he grit his teeth and swung with all his weight.

"Didn't you get suspended?" The guy asked, which was news to Steve. But then, everything was news. Steve wasn't able to explain the bloom in his sternum, goopy hot and molasses-thick.

"Yeah," Billy shrugged and took a sip of his beer. "But not for that."

The bartender came by with Steve's next drink, set it on the counter in front of him with an understanding nod as Steve slipped him some bills. Billy didn't even turn his head, didn't blink Steve's way in the heady crowd.

"I just messed up in one of the fights, got a nasty concussion," Billy shrugged. "It's pretty normal. It happens."

Steve caught the tone of Billy's sentence, finally understood what he found off about the conversation. Billy was smiling through his teeth. It was the smile he spared for adults, the one he'd seen in high school when Mrs. Figgins wanted to know why his homework wasn't done.

"Was the guy cute?" Steve asked.

Billy jumped, looked like he was one ounce of pride too shy from clutching his pearls, and whipped his head around. "Jesus, fucking warn a guy."

Steve grinned and sipped his rum. "I've been sitting here for almost five minutes."

"He was pretty cute," the woman said. "If you're into that shaven head, big muscles look. I'd do him."

The guy made a face. "Yeah, you couldn't pay me."

Billy nodded, wearing an expression that spoke volumes about his agreement. "I wasn't planning on being a political statement. Or, you know, getting minorly assaulted. That guy *was* suspended over that fight, and not because I kicked his ass."

"How'd your girlfriend take it?" The woman asked.

Billy shrugged and said, "She thought it was sort of funny." He sipped his beer, forced laugh on his lips. "We didn't last long after that. I've been taking a break from dating, honestly."

The woman shook her head, something predatory glinting in her eyes and lilting through her voice as she said, "Shame. I bet there's a line-up of ladies waiting to kiss you. And guys, clearly."

Billy laughed, dry but loud. "Sure they are."

Steve was already pointing with his pinkie, liquor-soaked statement tumbling out of his mouth. "I'd do it," he said, then realized what that meant. He took a large gulp of his drink, hoped the remark had been lost in the loud music and the acid burning down his throat. He thought of Zac Efron's floppy hair and water rolling over Billy's stupid chest.

The man at the bar grinned and stroked his beard. "Really?" He asked.

"He wouldn't," Billy said.

Steve couldn't read Billy's eyes, wasn't sure where the fervor in his own voice came from as he quickly said, "I could."

The air in the room was humid and thick, wrapping around Steve like bath water, making him sweaty and itching as he fumbled for a reasonable explanation. Booze made his heart clumsy, always had. He'd tripped and broken it with Nancy. This wasn't the same, wasn't a far cry, but it made him ache.

"Why don't we find out?" The woman said, sultry glint in her eye. "Do it."

"It's a dare," the guy added, pointing a finger between Billy and Steve. "I'll buy your next drinks if you plant a big one on him, right now."

Billy laughed the way Steve remembered, all throaty and vindictive, before he leaned to take Steve's hand. "You'd kiss me, huh?" he asked, and Steve shrugged up to his ears and tried to keep the heat from blossoming on his face, tried to remember how he'd dug this

particular grave.

“I haven’t found a plus one for the wedding,” Steve admitted, but he knew it was a non-answer, knew the liquor thrumming through his veins was making his morals slick and his tongue weak.

“Baby,” Billy purred, warm, alcoholic breath spreading over Steve’s wrist as Billy raised Steve’s hand to his lips, placed an open-mouthed kiss on the knuckle of his left index finger. “Didn’t realize you were in to that.”

Somewhere, Jonathan was convincing a bartender that Will and Lucas were just small for their ages. Somewhere, Tommy was downing his weight in Bacardi while he convinced a twenty-something grad student in an inappropriate dress that they should dance. Dustin was probably telling someone about the average amphibian’s reproductive cycle. Mike was tripping over his own feet on the dance floor. Steve knew all this rationally, knew anyone in the bar could see Billy holding his hand if they turned at the right time, but Billy caught his breath in a way his breath hadn’t been caught in years, in a way Steve was almost certain was Kraken, and knew he couldn’t take his hand back, not with how the bearded guy down the bar grinned.

“I’m open minded,” Steve shrugged, eyes level with Billy’s.

The woman clinked her empty glasses together. Steve glanced at her, glanced at the bartender, took a deep breath, and finally glanced at Billy’s wide grin. His teeth were like sharpened seashells, but the bags under his eyes gave him away, told Steve all the hesitance he needed to know. He turned his hand to lightly cup Billy’s jaw, ran his finger over Billy’s bottom lip.

Once, Billy had split Steve’s lips open, had cut Steve’s forehead with his knuckles until Steve’s eyes were black, his mouth bloody, his forehead covered in multi-coloured children’s bandaids for the next week. But Steve had punched Billy in the teeth, had broken the mouth now under his thumb.

“Are you waiting for something?” Billy asked, breath brushing Steve’s palm, and something gurgled deep in Steve’s abdomen, bled into a

coiling inferno.

Steve leaned enough to close the gap, pressed the softest of kisses to Billy's partially open mouth. The contact conducted electricity down his spine, increased when Billy pushed forward and took Steve's face in his hands, like he was pouring his power in to Steve's mouth, making him dizzy and vibrating. But when Billy pulled back and the bearded man hailed the bartender, Steve licked his lips and ran a hand through his hair. He told himself it was the rum. It had to be the rum.

In the morning, Steve woke to Jonathan snoring in his ear and Dustin passed out half-under Steve's bed. Mike was curled up by the window, Will by the wall, Lucas on the couch in the next room over. But there was a strong arm around his waist, too strong to belong to Jonathan, and the chest his head lolled against was blessed by the sun.

"I'm never drinking again," Jonathan groaned as Steve threw toast into the toaster and put on a pot of coffee.

Dustin dragged himself on to a bar stool at the island in Steve's open concept kitchen and rest his head on his crossed arms. "Fuck, Jonathan, I trust you to be original, Jesus Christ," he groused.

Steve pat him on the head and started handing out Advil as everyone trickled in. Everyone except Billy. Steve put Lucas in charge of the toaster before slipping out. He didn't remember Billy coming back with them, but he remembered Billy's lips and his laughter, and the way he danced with Will after the initial shock of his presence passed. Steve didn't know where Tommy had gone, but honestly, Tommy was a big guy, he could take care of himself.

In movies, people slept gracefully, their faces full of childhood innocence and beautiful wonder. Billy was not one of those sleepers. Steve watched Billy sprawl haphazard across the bed, messiness more obvious now that Billy had the space to himself, and found he didn't

have the words to describe the pinched look on Billy's cheeks where they smooshed in to Steve's pillow.

"Hey," Steve said, knocking on the door frame. Billy shifted but didn't wake. Steve wondered how often Billy slept like this, laid out in someone else's bed, and decided he didn't want to know.

Steve's head throbbed when he turned it too fast, so he sat on the edge of his bed slowly and jostled Billy with care until Billy shifted enough to glare one bleary eye and the hand on his arm. "Can I help you?" he asked.

"We're getting ready for the wedding," Steve said. "Like, nowish. I can put toast on for you?"

Billy groaned and rolled on to his back, causing the sheets to fall and leave his chest exposed, the chest Steve remembered under his cheek. "Do you still want me to come?" Billy asked, rubbed his eyes.

Steve blinked, tried to remember that part of their conversations, couldn't find it stored in his slowly returning memories of them kissing, of them dancing, of Billy's chest wrapped around Steve's back as they sat two to a seat in the Uber on the way home, with Billy's thick boxer arms Steve's best chance at a seatbelt.

The pause told Billy all he needed to know. He rubbed a hand over his face and sighed. "Your plus one? It's fine. It's whatever. I'll just—yeah, I'll grab some toast and make myself scarce."

And Steve suddenly remembered in technicolour, remembered the rum on his lips as he'd held Billy's gaze, the dull twinkle in Billy's eyes as he'd held Steve's chin between his hands. "If you want to come—" he said, but Billy shook his head.

"Nah," Billy said. "Lots of Hawkins people will be there, right? That's not a great time. Thanks for letting me crash all this, though."

And Steve didn't want Billy to be his plus one, knew what a disaster it would be, but felt the wildest compulsion to say please, to make Billy stay. But Billy was right, and as much as it made Steve's chest ache, made a large gobstopper choke in his throat, he knew he

couldn't beg. Billy's sneer was already turning the corner of his mouth, as if he smelled weakness like blood in the water, and Steve swallowed hard to try and clear his airway.

"Want me to drop you off somewhere on our way?" He asked instead.

Billy let out a long breath and stared at the ceiling. "My gym's not far from the shop? I've got this practice match coming up. I should probably show my face for once."

"A practice match?" Steve asked, his hungover mouth as unfaithful as his drunken mouth.

Billy scratched his chin and sat up. "Yeah, no money, no stakes, just a bit of trial to see if I'm up to shape again yet."

Steve's tongue was fumbling. He asked, "Can I come?"

The organ was the one part Steve didn't expect to choke him up, having heard the wedding march on TV and in movies, at weddings for people he cared significantly less about, but as those first chords played, Steve felt something unhinge just below his tonsils, coat his throat. Jonathan shifted beside him, nervous as ever, and Steve felt some of that, let it feed the dread blossoming in his abdomen and growing up his spine.

Nancy's dress was white and cut low in the back, the edges lined with pearls. Her mother had wanted her to wear something more conservative, something that wouldn't show her tattoos as much, something she thought would be more befitting of a bride, but Nancy hadn't listened to her mother in years, realized she'd never been very good at it.

Disapproval had still felt harsh when her mother nixed every dress Nancy liked. Steve had sat with Carol and Mrs. Wheeler through every dress and tried to be polite, but he didn't know shit about fashion, just knew he liked the ones that took his breath away. Jonathan loved Nancy, maybe more than Steve ever had, so Steve knew that was a good gauge. If Nancy was so beautiful it hurt, Steve

wanted her to have that dress. Nancy's mother never agreed.

When they would get home, away from the prying eyes of the dress saleswomen who didn't understand why Steve was there, he'd hold her shoulders as she gasped, watery-eyed and unsure, over what she would wear, how to make her mother and her heart proud.

Watching Nancy step around the corner and into the chapel, arm looped around her father's and gorgeous as ever, made him understand why she caused her pain. She was radiant, more poised than art. Jonathan was slack jawed. Steve thought he might be sick.

He stood through the vows, kept his mouth shut, his smile nailed on as he waited for the cue to clap.

Jonathan looked younger as he wrapped his arms around Nancy. He'd always had something weather-worn in the crow's feet he'd developed too early, in the laugh lines around his mouth. Steve had wanted to believe he'd developed those for Will, but as he watched Jonathan kiss Nancy for the thousandth time, arguably the most important time, he knew Jonathan had always been an older soul. Nancy had given him life.

Steve was drunk by the time he gave his speech at the reception, wobbly when he slung an arm over Jonathan's familiar shoulders and they raised their glasses. When Steve fucked up half his words in the middle, slap-happy and strangled, Mrs. Wheeler glared from the crowd, Mrs. Byers looked concerned, but Jonathan wheezed from laughter.

Notes for the Chapter:

I'm a day late, but who is keeping track, really?
Extra love and kisses to demogrove and
uncaringerinn, who believe in me and keep me
strong, and big kisses to you too for reading.
As always, comments and suggestions are greatly
appreciated. See you next chapter!

4. canaries in the mines

Water hit the back of Billy's throat like the tide rising over a parched beach. He wasn't really sure what time it was anymore, didn't know if it really mattered. He'd gotten to the gym around four, but the light seeping through the grated, wide windows on the far side of the room had darkened until they let nothing in but dingy street light. There was a clock in the gym, but no one had ever bothered replacing the batteries when they ran out, so it had been twelve fort-seven for the better part of ten months. Maybe that's why time now escaped Billy like moisture leaving dry mud.

It wasn't like he had anywhere to go or anything to do. He thought about getting food, maybe, wondered if hunger was the hollow pit in his gut, under all the sweat and muscle tissue. He set his water bottle aside and leaned forward against the ropes of the practice boxing ring. The platform was just high enough that he could dangle his shins. It was a little stupid, a little impractical, to let the ropes hold him. A week ago there was a cheek pressed to his chest and hot air tickling his clavicle.

Beside his water bottle, his phone sang. The right thing to do would be to answer it. *Psycho Killer. Qu'est-ce que c'est?*

Billy leaned back until his head touched the mats, hair sticking to his damp forehead as he breathed into the evening. He let his sticky arms rest above his head.

The phone stopped ringing. Billy rubbed his eyes, wondered who it was and if it would be worth it. Wondered why he got so many calls when he could count the number of people he'd want to hear from on one hand.

The phone started to sing again. Billy realized one of the people he'd counted didn't even have his phone number, wouldn't have it unless he paged through the client records at Upside-Down. The waiver Billy signed said they'd keep his contact information safe, and they hadn't lied, but he had.

The phone stopped ringing. Billy didn't want them to keep his

information safe. No one was going to call him. No one he wanted, anyway.

The third time the phone rang, he finally heaved himself up and picked up the call, leaning against the ropes as he asked, "What do you want, Max?"

"For fucksakes, Billy," Max said, the crease in her eyebrows audible down the line. "Do you make everyone call twice?"

Billy didn't have to ask who the first call was from, knew it like he knew that all the other calls for the last week probably weren't Clarke, probably weren't Max. Max had always had convenient timing. Some people would say that things always happened in threes, but Billy was too skeptical for that bullshit. Good things were always random, all the other shit was just bad, bad, bad.

That first call? That was bad.

"Nah, just the ones I like," he said. "What is it?"

"Lucas said he's seen you around. Like, what the fuck? You're talking to him now, but not me?"

Billy shrugged, but he rolled the motion down his back, turned it in to a stretch in the empty room. "He just happened to be there, alright?"

"Oh yeah, that's another thing," Max said. Billy could imagine her hair getting caught in her mouth as she stood on her apartment balcony, the lipstick she'd started wearing when she got a receptionist job at eighteen worn down to residue in the late evening. "What the fuck are you doing at the shop?"

Billy rubbed a hand over his mouth. "Have you been there?"

"No," Max said, tone going softer. "I haven't had the time. They've sent me pictures, though. It looks nice."

"Go visit," Billy said. "You'll see exactly why I'm there. Or better, just

check the address.”

Max huffed. “Whatever, cryptic asshole.”

“Whatever, bitch,” Billy muttered. “Anything else you want to yell at me for?”

“Mom wants to know when you’re paying her back for the dishes,” Max said, suddenly all business. She was probably still wearing the pencil skirt she’d worn to work, her hair still in a messy but professional bun.

Billy took a long drink from his water bottle and slammed it back on the floor. He wiped his mouth with his arm and said, “I can’t believe you’re taking dad’s side.”

“You know how he gets, Billy--”

“To me,” Billy snapped. “I know how he is to me. And if he wants to knock me around for getting beat up at my fucking job then yeah, I’m going to smash something. Fuck, when are you going to grow the hell up, Max?”

“When you apologize for shoving Neil into the china cabinet and breaking my grandmother’s teapot.”

“Yeah, well,” Billy said, “I’ll get right on that when he apologizes for punching me in the face. You’re going to be waiting a long fucking time.”

Billy sat on his couch with a bottle held to his lips and *Survivor* splashing from his television in furtive whispers, night vision and technicolour.

The concussion was work. The bruises were his dad. But the fracture? The fracture was all Billy.

Billy’s body was art. Steve was struck by it, breath caught in his

throat as he watched Billy's shoulder blades twist and his hips snap. Billy still chewed his mouth guard when he was all wound up, like he did in high school, but his working jaw froze when he ducked, clenched when he stepped forward to swing his glove. Steve thought of Billy's long hair piled high on his head when they played basketball in the twelfth grade, the way pieces with slip out of his bun and get caught in his mouth. Now Billy's short curls stuck to his forehead in places and bobbed as he weaved. Part of Steve wished he brought his sketchbook, wished he'd thought to put Billy's stronger, even more powerful body down on paper.

It rarely occurred to Steve that he'd touched those muscles. He'd twisted Billy's arms to put stencils on him, wiped Billy's bloody, inky skin with paper towel until he was sure he'd caused some bruising. He'd been accused of having a heavy hand when he worked, but he got so wrapped up some times he forgot to be gentle. It's something he was working on, being heavy handed. Dustin kept telling him to chill.

He thought of Billy gritting his teeth in Steve's chair, jaw working, and wondered if he should ask Billy to bring his mouth guard next time he sat, whenever that was.

Muscle made skin tight. The strongest people were the ones who hurt the most under the needle, because their muscles were hard, taught, burned like a motherfucker, made it feel like the whole body was an exposed bone.

People with muscles were some of the first to claim it didn't hurt. Steve had met tons of people who said it was just a tickle, that it wasn't that bad, but Steve wasn't in bad shape, he worked out, and he was covered in ink from his chin to his toes. It fucking hurt. It always hurt.

Billy dodged a punch and Steve watched him jump backwards, footing steady. He had learned, with time, to make each movement count. He'd always had that fire in him, but now Steve would see meaning in his movements, a sort of efficacy.

"Don't let that guy push you around," he had joked when Billy was sliding on his gloves, and Billy had grinned like a shark and lightly

knocked Steve's jaw with his glove like he was cleaning off dirt.

"I still know how to plant my feet," he had said.

Steve watched Billy's feet now. Billy didn't dance, like people suggested boxers did. Billy prowled. He bounced on his toes to keep his stance lower and his fists at the right height to block. He used his stature as a blessing. He'd always been a bit shorter than Steve. Not that anyone would know from how he puffed his chest and walked like he owned the earth itself.

Billy wasn't the beast Steve fought at Seventeen. He was sharper teeth and retracted claws. He was a new monster. Steve wanted to peel back his skin. He didn't even know what that meant.

"I fucked that guy *up*," Billy said, slapping his hands on the bar counter as he climbed up onto a stool. Steve waved a hand at the bartender and took the seat beside him, their grins matching in the low pub lighting. Steve rest his hands on the worn wood countertop and tried to remember the last time he'd gone drinking that wasn't with Jonathan. It he couldn't.

"You didn't win everything," Steve said. "He got some good hits in too."

Billy waved a hand and ran his tongue along his lips. It looked like old habits died harder than Steve realized. But like this, Billy looked alive, had enough spark in him for Steve to see the difference. "A few good hits isn't the match. Graham has to work on his footing if he wants to get the drop on me any time soon. But he's new, you know? Pretty young. I was getting the shit beat out of me when I first started."

And honestly, Steve couldn't imagine that, not from how Billy moved, not from how powerful Billy was when all he knew was dirty kitchen fighting and how to do a keg stand.

"So you picked someone weak to fight to impress me? Shucks," Steve said, eyes trained on the approaching bartender.

Billy smirked and drummed his hands on the table. "You think I give a fuck about you? I did it to impress myself."

"Guess I don't have to buy you a drink, then," Steve said, but ordered the first pitcher and asked for a basket of nachos.

"There is hope for humanity," Billy said. "Your taste in beer isn't as shit as your taste in coffee. I don't know how you don't see colours after drinking that much shit."

"Apparently my taste in coffee is as bad as my taste in friends," Steve said, pouring his glass and taking a sip.

Billy paused with his hand on the pitcher's handle, eyes wider than they should be and teeth grit. Steve looked at him, glass to his mouth, and stalled.

"We're friends?" Billy asked.

Steve shrugged and took a sip of his drink. "I mean, I voluntarily hung out with you all day, it would be pretty weird if this was like, a strangers thing."

Billy seemed to mull that over as he poured his glass, like the idea hadn't occurred to him, and it occurred to Steve that maybe it hadn't. Maybe they both saw strangers every day and had forgotten how to make the first move.

"You should keep that sappy friends bullshit to yourself, thanks," Billy said. "I'm not becoming one of your nerd brigade. I'm not doing that like, Dungeons and Dragons shit and declaring I care."

Steve pat Billy's arm and graciously took a chip from the pile of nachos as they arrived on the counter. "I care about you too, man," he said and sunk his teeth in to the chip with a crunch.

"You know," Billy said, two pitchers in and his arm a heavy weight around Steve's shoulder. They'd moved from the bar to a booth after the first pitcher, bones a little too loose and tired to trust the wobbly bar stools. "It's been a while since I've gotten to do this."

“Cuddle?” Steve teased, although he didn’t remove Billy’s arm, didn’t see the point in the dark room when he’d been thinking about his head pillowed on Billy’s chest since the day of Nancy’s wedding.

Billy jostled him but didn’t let go. “This isn’t a fucking *cuddle*,” he said. Steve wanted to ask what it was, then, just what Billy thought he was doing with his too-warm side pressed against Steve’s ribcage, his fingers tickling Steve’s neck, but Steve saw the moment like he saw the glasses on their table, unbendable, breakable, frozen in the moment until Steve or Billy picked them up. Steve didn’t want anything to move.

“Then what? What are you getting to do?”

“Just shoot the shit,” Billy said. “Get out of the house.”

Steve leaned his head against Billy’s shoulder and frowned. “Why did you come in to the shop, Billy?”

Billy looked at the glasses in front of them a long time. Maybe he was thinking the same thing Steve was thinking about tangibility and time, or maybe the words were just stuck somewhere in his throat, having a bit of trouble climbing their way out. When he finally spoke he said, “I don’t really know. Guess I wanted to see people I knew.”

Steve squinted at the table. People had carved their names all across the wood, an unspoken tradition. Steve wanted to pull out his keys. “You knew we’d be there?”

“Yeah,” Billy said, clearing his throat. “I looked the place up online. But I wouldn’t have come if your shit wasn’t good.”

Steve hummed like he thought that was true and finally reached for his glass, let the liquid make his thoughts dangerous and his tongue weak before he said, “Creep.”

“A little,” Billy agreed. It was only sort of defensive, probably muddled by Billy’s own spirits.

“Why?” Steve asked. “I thought you had buddies, were in with Kali’s crew, or whatever?”

Billy shook his head, jaw working again like it did in a fight, like it did was his bones were about to start vibrating out of his skin. He took a long swig to collect his thoughts, or maybe his courage, and said, "I broke Axel's arm."

Steve didn't know what to do with that, didn't know what to do with a lot of things, but placed a hand on Billy's knee and squeezed, like somehow that was normal and somehow that would help. "Why?" he asked, because Billy always had a reason for the things he did, even if Steve had known Billy at his worst, back when Billy had seemed vicious and chaotic and changeable as a fire's flames. Billy was his worst at his most reactionary.

Billy moved his knee. "Got into a fight with my dad," Billy said, but didn't explain. "It was just after my suspension. I was mad, went to the bar the guys always hung out at. I was kind of looking for a fight and Axel said the wrong shit. And like. He left with a broken arm and he fractured my leg."

"Jesus."

"Yeah," Billy shrugged. He pulled away and dropped his arm. "It was pretty fucked. And of course Kali took his side, because she's his girlfriend and she *cares*, but you know, I've known them five years, figured I'd get a little fucking grace."

Steve got out his keys and began to etch into the table, but he didn't write his name. He drew an anvil. "Shit, dude," he said. "I don't know, breaking someone's arm is pretty messed up."

Billy snatched his glass, Adam's apple bobbing and head tilted back as he guzzled the last drops. It was a wonder the glass didn't smash when he set it down and wiped a hand across his mouth. His shoulders were tense. His eyes were wild.

Steve dug his key into the varnish and waited.

"If there's a lecture coming then you better fuck off. I already got it from Carol."

Steve didn't doubt it, didn't even have to ask anything. Everyone

knew things about Billy's life, apparently, everyone but Steve, and he was starting to think it was a small conspiracy. What did they know that he didn't, why would they treat Billy's name like a dirty word?

Steve thought of Billy's tan shoulders and dense eyelashes, how the pendant he used to wear would bounce against his chest. Steve reached for his drink.

"No lecture here," he said. "Just, you know that's fucked, right?"

Billy nodded, emptied the rest of the pitcher into his glass and said, "Yeah, but he broke my goddamn leg."

"I thought you said we were going to your apartment?" Steve said, wrinkling his nose at Upside-Down Tattoos from the dingy street. A cat was yowling somewhere, scared and angry in the early morning, and Steve could relate.

"We are," Billy said, his hands in his pockets and his breath forming clouds in the cool night. He crossed the street and walked along the parallel shopfronts, all pitch black behind their shutters, all coated in frost. He gestured towards the alleyway four shops down and guided Steve passed the Chinese restaurant's dumpster and a broken table the comic book shop had chucked out their back door.

Billy walked passed two solid industrial doors before he made it to a door in the middle, different from ones lining the rest of the strip. This door had a small, grated window, revealing well-loved stairs and bright fluorescent lights.

"Sorry about the mess along there," Billy said, fumbling with his keys. "Sometimes the shops forget that this is a *respectable* neighbourhood." The way he said respectable was all curled lips and poorly hid resignation, like he'd lost the fight with his landlord a long time ago. Steve wondered how long Billy had lived in the building, was concerned that it wasn't long.

Steve must have worn his reservation on his face as he followed Billy up the stairs once they were inside. His jaw was stiffening without his

consent, his shoulders rising as he walked along the row of apartment doors in the surprisingly clean hallway. It wasn't until Billy stopped at until number four and fiddled with his keys again that Steve finally managed to pry his lips apart and said, "This is very close."

Billy shrugged and got the door open. "I said I just happened to see the shop. Not my fault you put it outside my window."

For a second, Steve wondered if this had to do with his conspiracy his friends created, wondered if they all knew about the shape of Billy's jaw and his lightly chapped lips. Steve took a deep breath and sighed until the paranoia had left his lungs. His friends weren't that clever, or that sadistic.

Steve's fingers were clumsy as he fought off his jacket. Billy had promised drinks, and no matter how weird Steve felt, he was also tired, intoxicated, and looking for something to remind him he could be wild.

Billy set his keys in a key dish by the front door, on a sideboard that Steve thought looked distinctly like the one he'd seen in Max's apartment when she first moved in with Lucas. Maybe Steve was imagining things, or maybe the blue walls of Billy's apartment and comfortable arm chairs in the living room looked a lot like the catalogue he remembered seeing on Max's coffee table.

There was only one picture Steve could see, tucked into a simple black frame beside the TV. The picture Steve had given him. The picture of Max.

Steve sunk in to Billy's worn leather couch and stretched one arm over the arm rest, let hand holding his beer dangle as he slung that arm over the back of the couch. "You know, Nancy thinks I drink too much," he said.

Billy snorted from where he leaned against the windowsill, one arm crossed over his chest as he sipped his beer. "Kali said the same shit," he said, and Steve just caught the shadow under Billy's eyes, the way he used the past tense for someone vividly alive.

“Women,” Steve said, like that meant anything, like he believed women to be nagging even though he constantly had to remind Carol to make important phone calls and remember to take her purse home.

“Sometimes things are better without them,” Billy said, taking another drink.

Steve had to think that one over, had to choose his tripping words as carefully as he could with a slippery mouth. “I usually miss them.”

“Miss them?” Billy asked, pushing away from the wall with his foot. “Buddy, you’re surrounded by them. Half your friends are chicks.”

And maybe it was the beer that had Steve licking his teeth and shrugging, eyes focused on the light on in the apartment across the street. “Miss touching them,” he corrected. “The gang doesn’t really count.”

Billy nodded like he understood and took a seat against the couch’s other arm. “Amen,” he said.

Steve laughed and rubbed his face. “Since when are you religious?”

“My mother was roman catholic.”

“Yeah, but you sure as hell aren’t.”

Billy shrugged and grinned, setting the bottle on the coffee table so he could spread his arms wide. “Hallelujah,” he said.

“Jesus fucking Christ,” Steve gasped.

Billy put a hand over his heart, a fist to his teeth. “Steve Harrington! Do you kiss your mother with that mouth?”

“God, I hope not,” Steve said, and it had to be the alcohol that had him setting his beer down on the hardwood floor and scooting across the couch into Billy’s space.

Billy’s smile faltered, but he took Steve’s shoulders into his hands as Steve pressed in close, tentative hands on Billy’s restless hips.

The first kiss wasn't easy, but Steve hadn't expected it to be. He wasn't sure what he was expecting at all, if he was being perfectly honest. He hadn't known what he had wanted in the bar, or what he had hoped for when he followed Billy home.

Billy's hands were sliding in Steve's hair, on Steve's neck, crawling down his ribs in a way that made Steve shiver, made him remember that maybe he should be trying to live off more than beer and Chipotle. Billy toppled Steve sideways and crawled between his legs. Steve canted his hips forward and grinned at Billy's soft gasp.

Steve slipped his hands under the back of Billy's shirt and traced the solid muscles shifting over his shoulder blades, hardened from years of throwing around his weight. Billy pulled back and Steve kissed the words from his mouth, firm and hot. Whatever cynical thing Billy had to say about their past or his scars or how he was a *bad guy*, Steve didn't fucking care. Being a bad guy didn't change how Billy's strong fingers kneaded Steve's scalp and made his abdomen tight.

A horn honked in the streets and Steve wrapped a leg around Billy's hips to drag him closer, savouring Billy's hitched pant as he rubbed Billy's dick with his thigh. Steve could cry, having missed lips and fumbling hands and someone other than himself shoving against him fast and needy.

Each kiss was slow and forceful, all nipping mouths and clacking teeth, nothing like love or trust. But Steve whined, savoured their bites, pulled each kiss from Billy with shaking hands, and came against Billy's knee with an amen on his lips and a mess in his jeans.

Across the room, Billy's jacket began to buzz and sing, *Psycho Killer*.
Qu'est-ce que c'est?

Billy laughed.

Notes for the Chapter:

Wow, so, this took me two weeks instead of one, but a lot of shit happened and I needed a bit of a breather. In theory, the next should be out on time.
As always, I hope you enjoyed this chapter. Let me

know if I made any glaring mistakes. And I love hearing your thoughts in general!

Extra special love to everyone. Gosh, you're all too nice.

Also, I keep forgetting to mention this, but you can find me on tumblr @eternalgoldfish.

See you next week!

5. ghosts and clouds and nameless things

Steve had good hands, Billy knew, could see the looping script across Steve's knuckles under the rubber gloves Steve wore as he worked. Billy knew those fingers and how they felt pressed into his back, pushed against his spine like hot rocks, like promises.

Billy watched as Steve drew black lines on Billy's leg where the stencil hadn't taken quite right, leaving the outline of a Camaro with holes and dashes. It was still surreal to see Steve with square glasses slipping down his nose, a sign of age, when they were hardly in their twenties. It was like the pain Billy got in his shoulders when it was going to rain. Un-fucking-believable.

Steve had let his hair grow long, but where Billy's had fallen to his shoulders in soft ringlets when he was a teen, Steve's hair fluffed up and flopped over, becoming this uncontrollable *thing* that Billy wanted to run his fingers through. He wanted to take that hair by the roots and pull it back, kiss up to Steve's ear from his collarbone and back. He wanted to suck a mark over the baseball bat with nails stretching the left side of Steve's throat.

Billy would claim it was to see Steve with his trace on him, like Steve was tracing Billy's skin, but he could see the scar on Steve's forehead, poking out between his hairline and his headlamp, and knew he'd already traced Steve with a kitchen plate. He'd left his rings on when he'd come at Steve swinging. He'd left traces everywhere.

Steve drew on Billy with his head ducked and his shoulders hunched, short sleeved polo exposing his toned arms. Billy now knew there were roses in Steve's elbow ditch, a Demogorgon on his shoulder, a queen of hearts, a betta fish, an anvil; a lighthouse that Billy had traced with his tongue the other night when Steve had curled drunk and hazy under Billy's bedsheets, complaining Billy's pale gray bedroom had no character.

They didn't have sex. Billy gave Steve clean boxers and they rest heavy against each other in the early morning, trading kisses and sharing space. Billy had wanted to fuck, felt breathless and jagged from Steve's pelvis grinding into his bones, but felt dry cackles

rattling around his ribs, the kind that made him tired and mean. Steve kissed Billy like he wanted to make mistakes.

Billy was fucking tired of being a mistake.

“I remember you having this car,” Steve said. “There were so many rumours about how you got it.”

Billy shrugged and looked at the TV. They were alone again, the shop silent in the middle of the day with Nancy on her honeymoon and Carol on vacation in Prague. Steve was watching *Flip or Flop*, and Billy wondered if he should have argued more passionately for *Kung Fu Hustle*.

“Honestly, my mom just bought it for me before she left,” Billy said. He could see Steve watching from the corner of his eye, couldn’t look at his face if he wanted to spit out a better explanation. Steve waited until the silence stretched too far, before he set down his pen and gestured for Billy to go look in the mirror.

Billy got up with a huff and a stretch and shifted in the mirror to look at his leg.

“How old were you?” Steve finally braved.

After another beat, Billy collapsed on to the massage bed and said, “Sixteen. She was done with my dad, I guess, figured I was old enough to look after myself.”

Steve nodded like maybe he knew something about that. He didn’t, but Billy appreciated the thought, the way he appreciated Steve starting the tattoo machine and running the first line with only a squeeze to Billy’s knee as warning.

“I don’t know,” Billy said, staring at the ceiling. “I guess she wanted me to have an escape? But she left and took the money. Split with dad. Used their preup to sell the house.”

Steve’s lips pressed into a fine line as he pushed his glasses up with his wrist and wiped the red from Billy’s leg. Billy knew there was too much of it, knew Steve could read his blood.

“My parents got divorced a year after we graduated,” Steve said. “It was a mess. They both bought one bedroom homes and I moved here.”

“You were probably better off,” Billy said, like Steve was relating, like he understood, “There’s fucking nothing in Hawkins. I was fucking lucky my dad didn’t sell that car, because I left the moment I could. Thought I’d make it back to Cali or something, for a second there, but like. It wouldn’t have been the same, you know? Shit from the past.”

Billy could remember beach vacations, days with his mother singing in the kitchen, seagulls hopping in muggy gas station parking lots while Billy jumped around the car to help his father clean the windows while the tank filled.

He looked at the cigarette burn just under his elbow ditch, his father was also a smoker, wondered how many people they’d marked.

Steve watched the TV a moment before turning back to Billy’s leg, something unreadable on his face as he said, “Yeah. I liked Hawkins when I was little. All the trees and crap, you know? Kind of spooky, but great for kids. Our parents let us run wild because there was fucking nothing there, just me, Tommy and Carol. But too much happened. I wouldn’t move back. You couldn’t pay me.”

Billy rubbed his jaw and shrugged. “I don’t know,” he said. “Depends, how much money would I be getting?”

“Kali, come on,” Billy said, shuffling his Docs on the dingy red hallway carpet and banging on the door. “I know you’re in there. You left your boots outside. Open up before I take them hostage.”

“They were cheap,” she called from inside, but Billy could hear her moving things around, the shuffle of papers, a clunk as she set her favourite mug back on the coffee table. It was one of those *do no harm, take no shit* things that had Kali in stitches when she bought it. Billy had gotten the joke—no one was more vindictive than Kali. She didn’t get even, she got biblical.

Honestly, it was a wonder Axel had been the only one to break one of his legs. Billy put that grace next to the number of times he'd held Kali's hair over a hotel toilet or slept on her couch when Axel had to go away for the weekend.

"Oh look, boot number one is going in to my bag," Billy said, swinging his black backpack half way around his shoulder as he reached down for a boot. Before he could get his bag unzipped, Kali was ripping the door open, black-rimmed eyes wide and bitter.

"What the fuck do you think you're doing?" she asked.

Billy shrugged and set the boot back on the floor. "I thought we might be the same shoe size. Figured I'd find out."

"You're a fucking giant," Kali reminded.

"Thanks, babe--"

"A fucking *short* giant, but still, you'd break my shoes, Jesus."

Billy rolled his eyes and set his hands on his hips, expression locked on the notch Axel had dug into the doorway on his move-in day, like a flag on the moon. "I'm not short."

Kali shrugged and closed the door a little, using her body like a deadbolt. Billy could see the television flickering in the next room, thought it sounded a lot like *Survivor*. "Do you need something?" She asked.

There were a lot of things Billy needed, a new microwave, some winter gloves, maybe a fifty dollar Olive Garden gift card, but he didn't have an answer as he dropped his stance and ran a hand through his hair.

"Look," he said. "I just wanted to know how things are going, you know, with Axel's arm and shit."

Kali squinted and held the door a bit tighter. "It's healing," she said. "Slower than your leg. Which, fuck you, go away. I blocked your number for a reason."

Billy had noticed his messages were going unanswered, but hadn't realized the grudge went that deep. He didn't know what to do with the angry sting in his heart that fought to climb up his throat and press against his eyes, so he shoved his hands in his pockets and squeezed his fists so hard his joints ached. He held his breath, exhaled hard, and said, "You know I'm shit. You know this is hard. But I'm fucking *tired* of it, okay? I fucked up. Bad."

Kali stepped back and slammed the door. The three locks clicked one by one until their soft snaps were replaced by Kali's growl. "Your apologies don't mean shit."

Rain hit the windows of Steve's apartment like jacks hitting pavement. In the late evening, Steve felt a little like a rubber ball, hitting the playground and bouncing up as Steve scrambled to pick up all the pieces. He'd never played jacks, it was an antiquated game by the time he was old enough to bring Hot Wheels and Yu-Gi-Oh cards to school, but he'd kind of always thought it would be cool as shit to take something so basic and make it in to a game.

Now, it didn't feel cool as shit. It made him feel jittery and restless, like his heart was vibrating up his windpipe, and he wanted to swallow it down as he shaded veins on the v of Billy's pelvis in his sketchbook, tried to remember the angle of the anvil on Billy's chest and the way his sweatpants had slumped down his hips when he had handed Steve a bowl of cereal.

They hadn't kissed when Steve had left. Steve wasn't sure it was the time, or what it would mean if they did. He didn't know how they were going to quantify that snapshot of an evening in the grand scheme of their lives.

Nancy was going to have a fit when he told her. Steve wasn't sure if it was going to be a proud fit or an angry fit just yet, but he was hedging on the second, the same way he'd envisioned Billy sitting in the pews at Nancy's wedding, shuffling his feet and looking a little too scruffy around the edges for the occasion, suit oddly sharp in contrast to his usual smile and jaw working as he watched Steve's heart ache. Nancy would have been furious. She had a lot of right to

be.

Steve found himself thinking of Billy's eyes on him more often than not now. He didn't want to buy in to it too much, didn't want to see the creature wrestling in his chest projected on to Billy's face like a misplaced promise, but it was there when he left work and it was there when he ran his needle over Billy's thigh. It was there when Steve put on HGTV to fill his apartment with the soft murmuring of contractors and interior designers, all promising a happy house meant a happy home.

Dustin asked Steve if he thought Grindr might open up Steve's dating pool, and Steve had hit him upside the head. He didn't need an app, but he was keeping that tight lipped. What he needed was a dirty website and the motivation to get Billy out of his skin.

Carol had sent him pictures of her adventures in Prague, arms slung around Tommy and a shiny cherry smile on her lips. Steve had had a crush on her too, once, but so had every other boy in their grade. She was gorgeous and smart, the way Nancy was gorgeous and smart, but with sharper teeth. When she started dating Tommy in the seventh grade, the only one surprised was Steve. He'd missed their lingering eyes and shy smiles, too distracted by their dynamic trio to notice the duo forming in the next room.

He'd felt betrayed, but it wasn't by Tommy. He was never really sure what the feeling was for. It wasn't harsh like with Nancy, where he'd read all the signs and lost his shit. In retrospect, it was childish, breaking Jonathan's camera, painting Nancy as a slut for the whole town to read. The second time Nancy chose Jonathan, he felt the resigned betrayal he had felt towards Carol. Confused and disoriented, but quiet. If Tommy ever proposed, eleven years with Carol already sitting under his belt, Steve would be his best man smiling. Maybe that was the difference with Nancy. Maybe he'd lacked enough time.

He traced the curls of Billy's hair and made them soft over his temples, drooping towards his long eyelashes. Billy had been blessed with a strong jaw and plump lips. Now that Steve had nipped him tenderly, he wondered where that lust had come from. Mostly, he wanted to know what he was meant to do with it.

On the coffee table, his phone began to sing, drowning out the rain at the window. Steve nearly tripped over his chair as he got up from the island counter and crawled over his couch for the device. "Hello?" he asked as he fumbled his way back to his work.

There was a pause and a breath. Steve was fucking done with telemarketers. Whoever decided cellphones should be on their registry needed to rot. He picked up his pencil and said, "Well, bye."

"Hey," Someone said quickly, and Steve pushed his glasses up on to his hair, set his pen on to his sketchbook.

"Hey," he said softly, checked his caller ID for what he already knew. "What's up?"

"Nothing," Billy said, but it didn't sound like nothing. It sounded choked, tired. Maybe it was just phone static.

"Cool, but like, why did you call?" Steve asked.

Billy laughed like he had in high school, jilted, and Steve turned to look out the window. After another pause, Billy said, "Guess it's just quiet here. My power is out."

"Shit," Steve said.

"Yeah, this storm sucks. Apparently like, this whole section of town has this important line or something somewhere that got fucked up?"

"Gross." Steve walked to the window and folded an arm around his body as he looked out the glass. The road outside was flooded, cold water rushing towards drains in all directions. "Power's fine here. Think I should unplug the TV?"

"No," Billy said. "But can you put on the news? I'm trying to keep up on my phone, but my data is shot this month."

Steve flopped on the couch and changed the channel before setting the remote next to his thigh. "Right now they're just saying there's a severe thunderstorm warning and to stay inside. Like, no fucking way."

“Did they remind you to bring an umbrella?”

“They fucking did, like I’m not going to be able to stick my arm outside and be like, oh shit, it’s raining.”

“We’ve got clear skies for miles.”

“Clearly,” Steve said. The weather. They’d been reduced to talking about the weather.

“Do you want to come over?” Steve asked.

“Do you think I should?” Billy replied. “I don’t think I could see out my windshield.”

Steve hadn’t thought of that, but he didn’t like the idea of Billy in his dark apartment by himself, probably sitting by a flashlight pointed at the ceiling for light, because there was no way Billy was hiding candles in that apartment. They would be too homey. Too sentimental.

Sitting in Billy’s apartment had made Steve want to buy him some throw pillows, which was stupid, because Nancy had bought Steve’s. There was just something so vacant about Billy’s blue walls, something that made Steve want to fill the space with noise and decorative key bowls.

“Nevermind,” Steve said.

Billy was silent a moment before he said, “I’ll come over if you want me too.”

But Billy was right, the roads were unsafe, and Steve had a sinking feeling he couldn’t name, one that warned him of hospital visits and fake greeting cards. “I think it would be bad.”

“Babe--”

“I’m babe now?” Steve asked. He wanted to sound amused, but even to his own ears, it came off as shaky, sort of scared.

Billy took a sharp breath. “Sorry, I call everyone babe,” he said. Steve

found that hard to believe, but didn't know if he wanted to draw a line in the sand, to call Billy out and cut the petnames short before they gave Steve hope or roped him in to something Billy wouldn't continue. They hadn't kissed when Steve left. They hadn't really done anything.

Billy pushed past the slip of his tongue and said, "I'm going to grab my keys."

"Don't," Steve said, probably too fast. He cleared his throat and said a little softer, "Please, I don't want you to get in an accident. Just stay on the line?"

Steve could hear shuffling over the wires, fabric moving against fabric and the jingle of keys being dropped on a table. "Okay," Billy said, and Steve could imagine him sitting back on his couch in his dark, chilly apartment, listening to the rain.

"I've got a real match next week," Billy said. "It's not for a huge prize, but Clarke thinks it'll get my stride back."

"Will it?" Steve went back to the counter and picked up his pencil, slid his glasses back down to his nose.

"I don't know," Billy said, and Steve put his honesty on the page, drew a smile on Billy's chapped mouth. "I was hoping some people might come. Kali used to go to all of them, but well--"

"Broken arm?"

"Broken arm." Billy sighed.

"I might be able to come," Steve said. "I don't know."

Billy clacked his tongue and said, "See? You're a babe."

A man who looked like he could probably bench press Steve wanted a waterlily tattooed on his hand, and for all that Steve was a little intimidated, he was more than willing to oblige. It had been a while since he had gotten to work on a hand and he was nervous about the

bones, had to work slowly as he laid down the linework.

The man clenched his teeth as Steve carefully wiped away blood and fiddled with his headlamp. It was Steve's first appointment of the day and he already knew that it was going to drag on forever. He loved his job, more than most people could even dream of loving their jobs, but there were still days where his soul ached for freedom, where he wished his art wasn't for money.

"What's up with you?" Mike asked, flopping into a rolling chair by the television and popping open an Arizona iced tea. It was one of the black tea ones, because Mike had horrible taste. Everyone knew the green tea with honey was better.

"Nothing?" Steve said, looking up to meet his client's eyes. Fuck, he couldn't remember the guy's name. Something with a C? "Is there something wrong with me?"

The client shook his head and grumbled, "Not that I can see."

Steve wondered if the client's silence was the cause of Mike's concern, but it wasn't his fault that his client was basically a brick wall. He was even like, six-five or something, and twice as built as Billy. Billy was built in a way that made Steve want to run a tongue over his abs, not run for the hills, and oh boy was that a feeling Steve had to digest, because each new thought about Billy's skin still made Steve's stomach twist, the same way his stomach twisted when he thought about Billy calling him babe.

"See, there," Mike said, pointing with his pinky as he took a sip of his obnoxious and inferior iced tea. "That's the look. Like someone messed up your hair."

"I don't care about my hair."

"Please," Mike groaned, spinning his chair in a circle. "You're a huge bitch about it. The biggest bitch. You probably have more haircare products than Nancy."

"Can I help you?" Steve asked, turning off his machine and setting it

down so he could glare. “Shouldn’t you be like, playing Angry Birds or something while pretending to do your job?”

“Jesus, no one plays Angry Birds anymore.”

“Mike,” Steve said, verbally honing his patience. “I’m about this close to finding something to slingshot at you. What do you want?”

“Nothing, the phones are just slow,” Mike admitted. “Do you want coffee or something? I was thinking about getting coffee.”

“You’re drinking iced tea,” Steve said, picking his machine up again. Brick Wall looked agitated. The sooner Steve got him out of the chair, the better.

“Yeah, but it’s cold. I want something hot. With like, smoked butterscotch.”

“That’s a thing?” Steve asked. He couldn’t remember what he’d seen on the menu boards. He realized the last time he’d been there to look, he’d been too busy looking at Billy.

“It’s seasonal,” Mike said. “Do you want something or not?”

Steve wiped Brick Wall’s hand and adjusted his headlamp. “Yeah. Get me a venti doubleshot on ice and a black bean quinoa wrap. But not the doubleshot with the gross new blonde espresso,” he said.

Mike scrunched his nose and said, “I like the blonde espresso.” And of course he fucking did.

Mike had been gone and impressively long time. Well, it would be impressive if Steve wasn’t starving and more sure than ever that they paid Mike to do exactly nothing. Dustin at least cleaned the shop or made store Instagram posts when the place was dead. He earned the right to play Angry Birds, which, rude, Steve still played.

Brick Wall turned out to be named Kevin, which was sort of like a name spelled like a C, except it wasn’t spelled that way at all. Steve had finished up his hand in half an hour and cashed him through

quickly, and still, Mike was not back. The nearest Starbucks was eight minutes away, ten if you walked slowly. There was no fucking reason he was still gone, unless he fell into an open sewer drain or some stupid shit along the way.

Steve was sitting at the front desk, doing Mike's job, when the bell at the front rang and snappy heels met the hardwood floor. Mid-afternoon cast the whole store in bright, warm light, and the city streets had dried like the storm last night had been a shared fever dream.

"Steve!" Max said, red hair swirling around her shoulders as she stepped up to the counter. She wore pale pink lipstick and an olive pantsuit and Steve never thought he'd get used to seeing her all grown up, the receptionist desk job she'd landed by some miracle out of high school making her mature before her time.

Steve was pretty sure that thirteen-year-old Max think twenty-year-old Max was a prissy bitch, and honestly, she'd be half right.

"Hey," Steve said, getting up from the desk and moving around to give her a hug. She was fairly tall, even without the heels, and Steve had to wonder how Billy felt about that. He wondered how Billy felt about a lot of things.

"Shit, this place is nice," Max said, letting go of Steve to turn around and take in the shop.

"Yeah, Carol went a little wild," Steve laughed. "But the murals are mine. Will helped with the concepts and we pulled it all together."

Max looked at the Demogorgon on the back wall and pursed her lips. "Isn't it a little morbid? You know, having nightmares on the walls? The Mind Flayer shit Will came up with when we were kids was really fucked and it's right there in the window."

"I think that's kind of the point?" Steve said with a shrug, sitting back behind the desk. "We wanted something ours. Something that made our shop different from the other shops we'd worked at. I would have never thought of it, honestly, but Will came up with it and it was actually a pretty solid idea, so like, it just happened."

Max nodded like she could make peace with that. "Wish someone had told me where the shop would be." She set her purse on the arm of the nearest couch. "I'd have told you who lived across the street."

"Yeah, that was a surprise," Steve said. He tapped his glasses case on the desk before snapping it open and shut, careful of the glasses inside. "But he's a regular now. He's cool. Although I'm a bit annoyed that no one told me. He took me over there the other day and I was like, what the fuck?"

"Honestly, I think I was the only one who knew where he lived," Max said, taking a seat on the arm next to her purse. "Lucas still hates his guts, so he's never been there. And I don't know, I don't think he really has any friends."

"You were his friend," Steve said, but he didn't know exactly who he was defending. "Well, step-sister, but he kind of had to choose to be your friend."

"I had to choose to be his friend," She corrected. "He wanted to be mine first."

"What happened?"

Max shrugged and looked at her nails. They were short, plum, and chipping around the edges. She said, "Doesn't matter. He did something dumb and I did something dumb."

"Seems to be a lot of dumb going around."

"Yeah," Max said, standing up. "But his dumb is worse. If you see him, tell him to get his shit together."

Steve set his glasses case on the counter and said, "I'll see what I can do."

Steve's thumb hovered over the call button longer than it should as he stood in the alleyway behind Billy's apartment. In the early evening, the Chinese food restaurant at the end of the row kept their kitchen door propped open to let out steam and shouts of Cantonese,

and the door of the comic book shop two doors down was held open by a crate of loose Funko Pops as one of the employees vaped on the back steps.

The weather was getting warmer as spring finally peered around the corner. Every now and then they'd get a hot flash, one day where the temperature rose warm enough for everyone to pull out their shorts, even though the forecast called for snow the next week. Steve had his jacket draped over his arm and sunglasses perched on his nose as he wondered if what he was doing was smart. It probably wasn't. He kind of didn't care.

The phone rang twice before the line clicked and Billy said, "What the fuck do you want, Dad?"

"Wow, first babe, now Dad?" Steve asked, aiming for an awkward chuckle as he peered up to the apartment windows. "I think we have to negotiate some of these kinks before they get out of hand."

"Christ," Billy said. "What do you want?"

"Now Christ? Wow," Steve teased. "Are you home? I'm downstairs."

"Yeah," Billy said, "You want to come up? I'm not great company right now."

Steve didn't know what that meant, but he was willing to climb the stairs and weather through whatever Billy had to throw down. "Honestly? I'm pretty shit too," he said. "I want to see you."

That was enough for Billy to agree, muttering a quick goodbye as he hung up the phone. By the time Billy was opening the building door to usher Steve in, Steve had tacked on his most confident fake smile, the one he told himself he didn't use for flirting, even though he knew that was a filthy lie.

For a moment they just stood there, Billy in the doorway, squinting in evening sun, and Steve on the stairs. Should they kiss? Steve didn't know. Was that part of their relationship now, kissing, or was it a one-off, something that happened in a drunken dream a week ago when their morals were loose and Steve wanted to set his nerves on

fire? Could Steve still wrap Billy up, find a way to convince him to stay curled close forever? Did either of them even want that?

Steve thought about the Camaro on Billy's thigh, how Billy couldn't make it back to California, could never retrace his steps to the romanticised history in his mind. That was something Steve could relate to, stepping forward and never going back.

"Do you want coffee?" Billy asked.

Steve thought about the venti doubleshot on ice still coursing through his blood, the fact that it was after eight o' clock and said, "Sure, yeah. I could have a cup."

Billy walked into the kitchen when they got upstairs and started pulling things out of cupboards while Steve fought off his shoes. There was a glass jar of beans, a coffee grinder, some kind of scale. Steve suddenly understood Billy's Starbucks contempt—what Billy did was *science*.

"Wow, you weren't joking about your coffee, huh?" Steve asked, watching Billy fiddle a filter into his surprisingly simplistic coffee maker.

"I drink a lot of it," Billy said. "Might as well drink the good shit, you know? Especially when it's easy."

Steve's version of coffee was Maxwell House measured to approximately one third of a cup per two cups of water, and frankly, he found that difficult without all of Billy's fancy steps, but he nodded his head and hopped up on the counter to kick his feet, aiming for casual. When Billy didn't tell him to get down, he took it as a good sign.

"So, like, I was thinking about the match you told me about."

"Oh, yeah?" Billy asked, hitting the power button. "What about it?"

The machine gave its first gurgle as Steve said, "I think I can make it. Like, if you actually wanted me to?"

"Why wouldn't I want you too?" Billy's arms were crossed as he

leaned against the counter on the other side of the kitchen, his eyebrows pinched and suddenly mean. "You think I say shit like that for my health?"

"No," Steve said, possibly too quickly. "I just, you know, thought you might have asked someone else, because I took so long."

"And who could I ask?" Billy said, meeting Steve's eyes. There was something old there, wounded, something Steve couldn't understand.

Steve felt his rubber ball hit the pavement and scrambled to pick up all of his jacks. He leaned forward and held on to the kitchen counter as he said, "I don't know. A friend."

"Oh yeah, because I have so many of those."

"Billy---" Steve said, tone clipped somewhere in the middle. "Look, I'm bad at this."

"And what is this?"

Steve shrugged and squinted at the kitchen tiles. They were gray and sort of chipped. They probably came with the apartment. "Friendship?" he said.

Billy stepped forward and pushed Steve's shoulders back, stepping in to the space between his legs. His hands were gentle, but his eyes were sharp like the edges of a shattered mirror. His expression was all angles. "That all?" he asked, and Steve shrugged.

When Steve spoke it was with frightened reverence. He could feel something writhing in his lungs. He said, "I don't know, babe, you tell me. I'm just trying to do whatever you think is best here, don't want to step on any toes--"

Hunger was a new concept to Steve's tired body, but he could feel it in the press of Billy's lips as Billy kissed him, pushed him back against the subway tiles and ran his hands over Steve's sides. Hunger growled in Steve's belly as he fisted a hand in Billy's hair and used it to pull Billy close until Steve was on the edge of the counter, arms firmly around Billy's neck as Billy kept him upright with his thighs.

Billy's lips were chapped and tasted like rum, and Steve found himself gasping at the taste, at his own intoxication. Every twist of his fingers, tangled in Billy's hair, made Billy hiss and grin like the wolf he had been at the age of seventeen, made Steve feel lightning shocked and feral.

"Friends?" Billy asked, nipping Steve's bottom lip.

Steve laughed, sharp and breathless, and pressed his face into Billy's neck. "Or maybe more," he said. "I'm still working out the details. There's a lot to consider, you know? Like, what would I even do with a guy as good looking as you?"

Billy licked Steve's mouth slowly, like he was trying to find something scared and nurture it out, maybe find Steve's heart at the back of his throat and coax it forward. Steve felt raw in Billy's hands, felt exposed with Billy lying on top of him, pressing their bodies together on Billy's bed as he pried Steve's soul open with his mouth.

Billy tasted like Kraken or Havana Club, mouth full of sting and spice. The coffee maker had finished percolating in the kitchen, but neither of them had poured a cup. Billy had been too busy pulling Steve's polo shirt over his head as Steve tried to figure out how he was going to pry Billy out of his tight jeans.

"Your shirt," Steve said, running his fingertips over Billy's abs.

"Your pants," Billy replied, popping Steve's top button open and sliding a hand under the waistband of his boxer-briefs.

But Steve was a gentleman, and for all he was selfish, he wanted to see Billy spread under him, naked, legs spread, leaky cock exposed as Steve inhaled his want. Step one was his stupid shirt, then his jeans. Steve would figure out how to flip their positions when the moment seemed right, but until then he was happy to play the needy one, to let Billy treat him kind.

"Shirt first," Steve insisted, and Billy groaned, pushed himself back on his knees so he could pull the white cotton over his head. All his

muscles rippled as he moved, taugth and twisting, deliciously hot under Steve's hands.

Billy was gorgeous, Billy was glorious. Steve scratched his nails down Billy's back and savoured his moan, helped Billy lift his hips so they could slide off Steve's jeans. Steve wanted to shake until all of his pieces fell out, wanted to see if Billy would shake apart with him. "Billy," he said, and caught Billy's eyes.

Steve would never be able to name exactly what changed, didn't think he had words in his vocabulary to define the air caught in his throat or the thump in his sternum as Billy looked down at him with crumpled eyebrows and an open mouth. He tasted like liquor. He had said he would be bad company.

"Baby," Steve said, tone the same but inflection different. "Billy," he tried again. "Billy, are you okay?"

Billy laughed, surprised and malicious, but ducked his head into Steve's neck to nip kisses across his shoulder. Steve dropped his hands to the black bedsheets and balled them in his fists. There were a lot of ways he thought his evening was going to go. He had envisioned maybe saying hi and getting takeout, or saying he'd go to Billy's match before skedaddling. There was no version he had dreamed up where he wanted Billy's mouth on his dick, or where that could be a distinct possibility.

Lord, as Steve wiggled his anxious hips and paused Billy's hand where it was creeping in to his underwear, he wanted nothing more than to let Billy continue to search and explore, to let Billy know him better than the apostles knew the bible. He wanted to run his lips over every smoldering inch of Billy's body, leaving chilly kisses in his wake as he absorbed all his warmth.

Sometimes the kids talked about different realities and reality divergence, like maybe those things were real and maybe science fiction was possible, and Steve honestly didn't think that sort of conspiracy theorist mumbo-jumbo was worth shit, but with sudden, aching clarity he saw the unforeseen path he was on and the divergence lying in front of him. His body yearned. He had to pick the right path.

"I'm fine," Billy said. "Just thinking of what I've got here, you know? Fuck, Harrington, you're so goddamn hot."

Billy pulled on the hand wrapped around his wrist, the one keeping him from grabbing Steve's dick, and Steve wanted to let go. Fuck, he wanted to let go so bad. But he heard the crack in Billy's voice, thought about being called Dad, and had to pull Billy back.

"What the fuck?" Billy said, but Steve kissed his knuckles, pressed a kiss to his open palm.

"I want to fuck you," Steve said.

Billy leaned forward and snatched his hand back so he could use it to brace himself as he loomed centimeters from Steve's mouth. "Then don't just say it," he nearly growled, "Do it."

Steve wondered if he hated himself, thought he might with all the shit he'd been pulling lately, all the shit he was about to pull. "Why did you think I was your dad?" He asked, and hated how breathless he sounded, how wrecked he was by Billy's hands.

His words did their job, they broke the spell. A toothy sneer washed Billy's face. "Does it look like I want to talk about my dad right now?"

"No." But Steve suspected Billy never would, had learned the value of hard truths and honesty from Nancy. "But you're not like, okay, right?"

"I was fucking fine until right now," Billy said, but he didn't pull away. He kept his arms locked around Steve's head and their cooling hips flush, the temperature in the room having dipped twenty degrees since Steve opened his mouth.

Steve was still restless, but the tension in his groin was irritating, unresolved. "Don't lie to me," Steve said. "If you want us to fuck then—like, fuck, don't lie to me."

"I'm not lying," Billy said.

"No," Steve replied, tongue tripping his words faster than any

alcohol. “You’ve been drinking.”

Billy propped up onto his knees and shook his head. “What does that matter?” he asked.

“I don’t know,” Steve said, following Billy’s shifting curls with his eyes. “You tell me.”

It looked like Billy might run, might just fucking take off at the speed of light, jump out the window, hitch a ride on a garbage truck, end up somewhere by the moon where Steve could never find him, and Steve couldn’t let that happen, not now, not with them in Billy’s bedroom with the last dregs of evening sunlight washing them in inky gray light, not with how Billy had carved a hole in Steve’s life.

Steve took Billy’s hips between his hands and pulled him back down to the bed. For someone who was trying to fight, Billy went down with surprising ease. Steve would have thought it was suspicious if he wasn’t curling a leg over Billy’s knee, lining up their limbs like those of an eight-legged beast. Billy hadn’t said a word. Steve wasn’t entirely sure he wanted him to.

City sounds reached their windows as commuters made their way home, hoping to beat the last of the dying evening. Steve listened to the hitches in Billy’s breath for a long time before he asked, “Do you want me to go home?”

“Maybe,” Billy said.

Steve wondered what that meant, wondered if he’d live the rest of his life parsing cryptic answers, or why he even thought Billy would be in the rest of his life. He wondered when he’d started believing in his own rash promises. “Let me stay.”

Billy sighed but tilted his head to kiss Steve’s hair. He said, “Don’t make me talk about my dad.”

But Steve couldn’t keep that promise and had never intended to make it. “Instead,” he said, “You could tell me why you hardly answer your phone. I wasn’t sure you were going to pick up, earlier.”

Billy shifted under Steve’s weight and huffed. “I get a lot of calls from

a lot of people I don't want to hear from anymore.”

It wasn't a great answer, it wasn't even really a good answer, but Steve could see the weight of Billy's words. There had been a lot of shit lately that made Steve realize how oblivious he could be, but he was starting to learn Billy's language. He thought maybe he could figure out how to pick out all the jacks stuck in Billy's skin.

“We can't fuck tonight,” He told Billy. “But like, listen, listen. It's just because you're sad and I can't, you know, do that.”

“What,” Billy sneered, “No pity boner?”

“No,” Steve said, before sliding a hand up in to Billy's hair. “If we're doing dumb shit like this, we have to do it right.”

“And what is dumb shit like this?” Billy asked.

Softly, Steve kissed Billy's chest and said, “No fucking clue, honestly

Notes for the Chapter:

Wow, I'm increasingly more terrible with my own deadlines.

Also, holla at the ten thousand typos I probably made in here. If you see one that's particularly nasty, please let me know. I catch exactly zero of my own errors.

Tons of love to demogrove and uncaringerinn, but also to every one of you who has cheered me on thus far. Thank you for reading! I hope you enjoyed this chapter.

Assuming my week isn't hell, the last chapter should be up next week.

6. squint your eyes and hope real hard

This one time in high school someone spotted a bruise on his arm, peeking out from one of the flannels he'd started wearing around the time grunge was back in style and he was feeling angry and against the world. He was still angry, suspected he might never not be angry, but that fire to see society burn was gone, replaced with only the sort of mild acceptance that came with being twenty-four and lost in a sea of humanity.

Someone had spotted the hand-shaped bruise on his arm and told someone, who must have told someone, who must have made an appointment with the school counselor. At the time, Billy couldn't think of who cared enough, but in retrospect it must have been the autoshop teacher, Mrs. Pierce. He always got hot in her class and ended up pushing up his sleeves or wrapping his shirt around his waist. She liked him. She thought he was smart and gifted with a wrench. He just wanted something to build.

He'd fixed his Camaro so many times from spinning out on country roads when he was teary with rage and taking corners too fast. He'd treated that car like a lifeline and worn it to the bone. He still had it in a parking lot a street over from his apartment, the only parking his building accommodated in such a dense part of the city. There was nowhere to drive fast in Chicago, just a lot of sluggish cars and bitter commuters.

The counselor had took one look at the spark in his eye and had asked him about his home life, if he had ever self-harmed, if he'd ever thought of suicide. He said no, no, my home life is fine, I'm fucking fine. She'd told him to think of something peaceful when his mind went double time, tried to explain how to anchor himself in dumb shit like colouring books, how to take deep breaths, how to activate his dive reflex and slow his heart until it stopped making him lightheaded. He thought most of it was bullshit. He never went back.

He clenched the sink in the change room as the sink filled and he rolled his shoulders. The match was starting soon. He could already hear the murmur of the crowd in the stadium, the screech of

Thunderstruck over the stereo. He would be out in a minute.

The sink was nearly overflowing, the hole in the side glugging as it tried to take away the surplus water. Billy took a deep breath, twisted off the tap and dove. The water was a shock, hit his lungs hard. He stood there with his face under water until his chest ached, but when he pulled back he was a new man, refreshed. He let the water out, grabbed his gloves and mouth guard, and made his way out to his side of the ring.

It would be five minutes to the match. The crowd clapped loudly as he entered and dropped off his things with Clarke, who looked pleased, if not a little nervous. Scott Clarke was always a little too excited for his own enthusiasm. He used to be a middle school science teacher. Max thought he hung the moon.

“Ready?” Scott asked and Billy nodded.

The room was filled with chattering voices and bouncing fans. Billy had forgotten how many people followed his career. It was weird to know that so many people he’d never met wanted success for him, so many people who’d never seen what he was capable of, what his real violence was like. The people that knew his insides had stopped coming. They didn’t like what they’d found.

He took a deep breath and scanned again. Steve had said he’d come. Steve with the slightly broken face, scars on his arms under the looping skulls and roses, the anvils and killer whales.

When their eyes met, Billy dove again. Steve didn’t seem to notice, but he grinned like an idiot, a really charming idiot, and gave a dorky wave from his place in the front row, tickets courtesy of Clarke. He was in a dark blue, short sleeved button up with flamingos on it, like the nerd he was, and suddenly, Billy’s chest was achy, like he was still taking on water.

But the match wasn’t about Steve, and as the announcer came on to introduce the match, Billy turned back to the ring and put in his mouth guard. He rolled his shoulders and chewed the rubber, pulled on his boxing gloves.

When it was time, he grabbed the ropes and hauled himself into the ring.

Fighting had always been second nature for Billy, but learning how to be smart about it, safe, was like learning to walk again. Pulling his punches wasn't the problem, it was placement, learning to use his fists and not his teeth. As he circled the man in front of him, a tall Welsh guy with short cropped hair and a pointy nose, he kept his fists at the right height to protect his chin.

When Billy fought there was no crowd. Any roar of thunder, music, heckling was replaced by the buzz of blood between his ears and the sweat on his lips.

The other guy was mean, but not as mean as Billy. When the moment opened, Billy threw the first punch, missing by just a hair as the other guy ducked backwards and surged forwards for a counter-punch. Billy was ready, blocking the hit before he bounced back himself. He needed space, needed to get into his rhythm.

Billy's next punch was also ducked, but he continued to swing, landing a solid left hook to the guy's jaw and following it with a swift uppercut.

The crowd roared. Billy kept on swinging.

"You fucker," Steve said, the gasp he'd been holding back escaping so sharply it hurt.

Billy's head hit the mat with a harsh crack, the kind that made Steve's gut lurch, the kind that made him think of second impact syndrome and Billy carding his hands through Steve's hair late at night, explaining a hospital diagnosis and a boxing glove.

Billy had taken other hits during the fight, was enough points down that Steve already knew the outcome from Billy's slightly puffy nose and blinking eyes, but there was something final about him going down, about the way his head hit the ground that made Steve tense.

Any hit could have hit Billy, but this one was bad.

Steve bit his lip and leaned forward in his seat, muttered, "I will kill you if you don't get the fuck up, you asshole." It was the closest thing to a prayer Steve had said in years, and he'd done a lot of praying, back when Will was seeing demons and Dustin was calling at midnight with a cracking voice, asking Steve if he could maybe come by, if it was cool if they had a sleepover.

If Billy died over a stupid boxing match, Steve would get a Ouija board, resurrect his ass, and kill him all over again. He was sure Nancy would know how to do it. She'd gone through one of those witchy phases in her college years. Steve still had some of her healing rocks, wondered if maybe he should start carrying one around, just in case he needed some extra hexy voodoo karma shit to keep his boyfriend on his feet.

There it was. Boyfriend. A word Steve would definitely never get to use if Billy died, like a dumbass, in front of a whooping and jeering crowd. A word Steve wasn't even sure he wanted, wasn't sure how to place in his vocabulary next to all his other half-baked promises. Billy wasn't allowed to die before Steve got his shit together. Fucking bitch.

Steve ground his teeth and felt his disappointment from the lost match simmer under his skin as the announcer started to call the final score, hearty bellowing accompanied by air horns and the vicious crowd. Steve couldn't pull his eyes from Billy, didn't want to if he tried. There was a medic coming to look at him, but from what Steve could see, the man was mostly speaking to Billy. Billy's lips were moving in response, so not dead, thank fuck, but seeing him on the ground didn't make Steve feel all that much better.

Billy was going to be angry. He was going to be furious, or he was going to be bitter. It had been a long time since Steve had seen Billy's gut reaction to hurt, but Steve had a good idea from Axel's crooked arm and the broken beer bottles Steve had seen in Billy's kitchen garbage.

So when Billy finally tilted his head towards Steve and immediately caught his eyes, Steve was not expecting desire, a fire for life, a sort

of chaotic, gleeful determination that choked Steve up and sent his mind spinning. Billy wasn't angry. He was *glorious*.

Steam and hot water rushed from the locker room shower, post bout adrenaline still hanging around Steve's shoulders as he leaned against the tiled wall outside the shower and hit the curtain of Billy's stall.

"Jesus," Billy said, snapping the curtain back.

Steve grinned and took in Billy's soapy hair and slick chest. He said, "Well, that could have gone a lot better."

"No shit," Billy said, closing the curtain.

"You don't seem upset."

"I'm not," Billy said. The water shut off. "Can you pass me my towel? Thanks. There's always going to be a loser in every fight, you know? So I don't get the prize today, whatever. I've got money saved, backup in stocks I can pull out."

Steve rolled his head back and stared at the ceiling, said, "This isn't about money." If the fight were about money, Steve wouldn't have caught that hunger in Billy's eyes, wouldn't have been so turned on.

Maybe Steve had a thing for losers. It wouldn't explain Nancy, but more or less everyone else in his life was floundering for some vague sense of purchase, and maybe that's why he didn't get to keep her. Maybe she was too good. Maybe what Steve needed was rough hands on his hips, some untamed spark.

The thought sounded mean, even to his bitter ears. Billy wasn't angry for the loss, but Steve could feel the ache. He had wanted to see his man be the champion, and wow, wasn't that another bold thought, a second of stupid optimism. Billy wasn't his boyfriend. Billy was an old enemy, a new friend, that he had ended up in bed with when he'd intended to stay for five minutes. A friend he had somehow ended up kissing, somehow ended up entranced with.

"I mean, it's kind of about money," Billy said. "But did you see that

left hook I gave him? Jesus, I thought I was going to break his nose.”

Billy didn't sound remorseful, he sounded *ecstatic*, and Steve was struck with the sudden urge to kiss the words from his lips, to use that fire to fuel his belly.

“You still lost.”

“I still kicked his ass. Next time the motherfucker is done for. He's got his name on my list now.”

“So it's about taking names, not earning money?”

Billy pulled back the shower curtain with the towel around his waist and his hair hanging limp around his ears. Before Steve could press away from the wall, Billy was caging him in, warm, wet arms bracketing his head and Billy's nose brushing his own. “It's about the fucking feeling, okay? Stop asking questions.”

Steve could do that. He ran his hands up Billy's sides, grinned when Billy gasped. “You're going to get us in trouble,” he said as he wrapped his arms around Billy's waist and slid a pinky inside the towel.

“I can't fuck my boyfriend in the showers?”

“Now I'm your boyfriend?”

Billy looked like he was going to backpedal, like he was going to pull away, but Steve had made the same mistake in his head, and he was kind of tired of making mistakes. Almost everything in his life was a mistake. Pulling Billy closer by the hips and kissing him wasn't one of them.

“Let's just go slow before we call it anything,” Steve said against Billy's lips.

“Is that a no to having sex in here?”

“It's an I'm starving, your match was fucking long, and I think we should get Chinese food.”

The Chinese food restaurant under Billy's apartment was a blessing and a curse. A blessing because the food was made quick and hot, because Billy was a regular and the cooks appreciated his warm smiles and punchy jokes, but a curse because it meant the whole way home, Steve was thinking about Billy's warm, clean skin under his hands and how Billy had whispered in his ear.

They had to take separate cars because they'd arrived at different times and Steve didn't trust his car in a part of town he didn't know. The traffic had been agonizing. At some point, Steve had lost Billy between red lights and from there on out he was on high alert, trying to spot a hint of that well-loved Camaro passing between Mustangs and Honda Civics.

It was strange, how much he wanted Billy under his skin. Strange and elating. Steve took turns a little too quickly and thought about Billy's jaw. When he parked, Billy was already in the parking lot and Steve was second guessing his decision that dinner should come before Billy's bedsheets.

Billy had tossed his keys in the air, caught them, and grinned, and Steve had power-walked to the restaurant before his will gave out and he pressed Billy up against the brick wall of the alleyway.

The restaurant was warm and filled with shouting in Cantonese, mostly happy banter as the cooks shuffled about in the long kitchen with open cut-outs that took up most of the narrow shop. There wasn't really a sitting area, just a few small tables tucked around the outside of the kitchen, all cracking and scratched up from years of heavy abuse. The air was filled with sizzling and steam, and playing under all the chaos was Celine Dion belting out *My Heart Will Go On*.

Under normal circumstances, Steve would have reveled in a place like this, and as it was, he could definitely see why Billy would spend his time hanging out at one of the cracked tables, staring adoringly at a bed of sweet and sour chicken over crispy lo-mein noodles. However, Steve's skin itched as he waited for the bell to ding signalling that their order would be ready. He held Billy's wrist, unable to keep his hands from touching *something*, and Billy was

surprisingly accepting, almost smug when he wiggled their hands until their fingers were tangled together, palm touching palm.

Steve hadn't taken Billy for someone who liked holding hands, and the way Billy fidgeted next to him made Steve suspect that he wasn't, but the sentiment was fuel for the hot, sticky feelings in Steve's chest and abdomen, sweltering them into something fond and antsy.

The bell dinged. Billy dropped Steve's hand and grabbed the bag from the counter, shouted a quick thanks in Cantonese as he bolted out the door.

The bag of food sat untouched on the coffee table, steam trapped in the plastic as the food waited. Billy pressed Steve into the sheets and unbuttoned his flamingo shirt as Steve fumbled with the buttons on Billy's jeans. Steve wanted Billy's mouth everywhere, wanted to feel him gasp as he planted kisses along Steve's abdomen, his thighs. Wanted Billy's nose tickling the hollow behind his ear.

"I'm just going to-" Billy said against Steve's lips, "This would be easier if we just-"

"Yeah, yeah," Steve said. Billy was off him the next second, hopping on one foot as he fought off his ridiculously tight jeans. Steve laughed and sat up enough to pull off his shirt, lay back to prop up his hips and pull off his pants, underpants.

Billy pulled his shirt over his head as Steve pulled off his socks. He lay back and watched Billy work on the rest of his clothes, couldn't help but let his hand wander down to his impatient cock as he watched Billy move. Last time, he'd wanted Billy quaking under him, aching red dick sticky with desire and hips rocking, but this time, Steve wasn't feeling kind, wasn't feeling courteous. There was no reason not to spread his legs and groan softly as he waited for Billy's hands to replace his, no reason to remain unselfish, no reason not to take. Billy looked wild from his fight and Steve wanted that toothy grin to chew him over.

"Jesus Christ," Billy said, when he finally looked up. His jaw was

slightly slack, but the hunger was back in his eyes, the spark that promised to strike Steve like lightning and burn him like a forest fire.

Steve gripped himself and took a sharp breath as his eyes roved over Billy's abdomen, down to his thick cock. He'd seen Billy naked before, but never like this, never heady and shaking. Like this, Steve could see the power in Billy's body, the raw beauty of it. He let himself indulge the part of his mind that wanted to trace Billy's hips with his tongue.

Steve met Billy's eyes, half-moaned and asked, "Are you going to do something, or?"

Billy kneeled back on the bed, pushed his way between Steve's legs, and took Steve's dick into his mouth, swirled his tongue around the tip like a professional, like he'd fucked a lot of guys, and it occurred to Steve that maybe he had. Maybe that was something he should have asked before he ran in, dick blazing.

Billy replaced his mouth with his hand, instead sucking kisses into Steve's inner thighs as Steve groaned and squirmed beneath him.

"That's unfair," Steve said, and Billy grinned against Steve's leg, tugged his cock in retaliation. He pulled Steve's half-bent leg close enough to kiss it, teasing as Steve flexed his toes.

"What are your feelings on getting fucked?"

Steve's breath stuttered at the idea, the hands on him, said, "I've never tried it?"

"Shit, seriously?"

"Yeah," Steve said. "I've only been with chicks. I've like, had a few girls finger me?"

For a second, Steve felt his stomach lurch, thought the pinched look on Billy's face was disappointment. Then Billy threw his head back and laughed. "Fuck, okay, okay," he said, before dropping Steve's dick and leaning up to kiss him. "We'll see where this shit goes. I'll make you feel real good, okay? No matter what."

"Thanks," Steve said. The irritation in his voice was accidental, as was the crack in it. He thrust his dick against Billy's, earning himself a moan and another laugh.

"Geeze, wait," Billy said, eyes gleaming. He reached over Steve to grab lube and a condom from his dresser, dropped them on the bed by Steve's side.

"So *can* I finger you?" Billy asked, and Steve whined.

"Yes, fuck."

Billy kissed him once more before sliding down his body and breaking open the lube. Steve hadn't been lying. He'd started fucking himself years ago, had begged his more adventurous girlfriends to be rough with his body, to slam their lithe fingers against his prostate until he was shaking and weeping, but Billy's hands were firmer and more worn than any of those women, and Steve could feel that knowledge swelling in his groin, clenched his teeth in anticipation.

With his mouth around Steve's dick once more, Billy pushed his finger into the tight ring of Steve's ass, moved his hand slow and his mouth fast to help Steve get through the sharpest part of the invasion, as if Steve wasn't savouring the pain.

Steve moaned, already feeling a little shaky and undone, a little exposed. "Fuck, Billy," Steve said, and Billy made good on his promises, worked Steve with his mouth and fingers until Steve was pulling on his shoulders, one hand knotted in his hair.

"Kiss me."

Billy dragged his nails down Steve's ribs as he did just that, Steve's legs wrapping around Billy's hips as they rocked together, breathless and a little jagged. "What are your feelings on fucking me?" Billy asked, and Steve cursed, arched his back.

"Whatever. Whatever you want."

"It might be a bit soon for whatever I want. I thought kinky shit was usually like, third date?"

Steve laughed, deep and throaty. "We would have to have a first date," he said. His breath caught when Billy lightly pulled his hair. "Just fuck me. I'm already ready. It's whatever."

"It's whatever?"

"*Billy*," Steve growled, snapping his hips. "If you don't do something right fucking now--"

Billy laughed and grabbed for the condom, kneeled tall above Steve as he slid it on. Steve watched, entranced at how Billy's fingers moved, wondered if it would always be so surreal to see someone other than himself hold their dick with a sturdy grip and tug.

"Billy--"

"I know, Jesus."

Billy pressed his dick in slow, let Steve adjust to the new weight inside his body. "Wow," Steve said, "And people make a fuss about this?"

"Shut up," Billy laughed. "Is it bad?"

"It will be if you don't start *moving*."

A car honked outside as Steve's nails bit in to Billy's back, first from sharp, alien pain and then from the low shudders of glory rushing through his blood. He knew the knobs of Billy's spine in his mind's eye, could put them down on paper, but he was learning how to mold them with his hands, what Billy's skin felt like slick with sweat as he moved against Steve's hips, his chest.

Billy was hot to the touch like well-worked clay, hot as the breath stuck in Steve's throat as he gasped towards orgasm, Billy's thrusts growing harder as Steve rocked his hips back.

The Chinese food was a little cold.

Steve wondered if everyone knew, wondered if they could tell how familiar he was this the planes of Billy's chest as he pulled a line across his pec, just under his collar bone. He wondered if everyone could see the affection in his eyes as clearly as he knew it was there, or if that was just hypersensitivity, his own awareness of how close his mouth was to Billy's in relation to all the other mouths on all the other people in the world.

It had been a week since Steve had last seen Billy, a week since he'd slept in Billy's bed, because they were busy men and Billy had a lot of work to catch up on and Steve was finally getting steady clients, but they had texted. Steve tried to pretend it didn't make him equal parts giddy and aching. New relationships always fucked him up a little bit.

"*Love It Or List It* again?" Dustin groaned, sitting in the rolling chair on the other side of Billy's massage table with a huff.

"It's pure gold," Steve said, pulling his machine away long enough to adjust the wires before returning to the handcuffs he was tattooing parallel to the anvil on Billy's other side.

"It's staged."

"So is *The Bachelorette*, and you think that shit is fire."

Dustin rolled his eyes and pointed at Steve. "One, I only watch that when Nancy wants to, because I'm nice, and not because I'm emotionally invested in a contest based around fake love even *if* sometimes I scream at the tv. Two, no one calls things fire anymore. It's done. It's dead."

"Shut up," Billy said. "They're about to show the second house."

Dustin, for once, looked completely lost for words, mouth gaping right up until Nancy poked her head in from the other room and said, "Not you too."

"Stop it," Steve said. "It's a good show."

"Steve, it's for middle-aged women," Nancy said, very patient, very kind.

“Then middle-aged women having fucking great taste.”

Dustin looked at Nancy with a solemn frown and shook his head. “Nancy, he’s already a soccer mom.”

Nancy rolled her eyes. “At least watch *Flip Or Flop*, it’s way better.”

“Betrayed!” Dustin yelled, as Steve shouted, “Blasphemy!”

“Seriously,” Billy groaned. “Shut the fuck up. Why do you guys always have to be so mouthy in here? Jesus Christ. It’s a small room. You don’t need to yell.”

The house on the television was a red bricked bungalow with black shutters and large windows. Steve looked at it while he wiped Billy’s chest, grinned because he could read Billy’s blood. The house had a black front door and through the front windows Steve could see smooth hardwood flooring and a silver fireplace. He pulled another line on Billy’s arm and said, “Wow, and you’re not even hungover this time.”

Dustin twisted uncomfortably in his chair as Billy squinted at the television. “What does that mean?” Billy asked.

“I’m going to get Starbucks, who wants?” Dustin hopped to his feet and pushed his chair so it rolled into the wall.

“Dark roast, but not if it’s Italian or French,” Billy said, eyeing the shiny kitchen cabinets on tv.

“I’ll have a salted caramel mocha, almond milk, no foam, no whip, extra hot, extra caramel drizzle,” Steve said without blinking, although he caught Billy’s stare out of the corner of his eye. “Make sure they put the caramel on the inside of the cup.”

“That’s not real.”

“It’s real. Oh, make it triple.”

Billy scrunched his nose. “Let me rephrase, that’s not coffee.”

“It does what the lord intended coffee to do,” Dustin said, tapping the

instructions into his phone. “Nance, you want a green tea latte?”

“Vanilla, no foam, six matcha, soy!”

“Christ,” Billy said.

“Fuck you,” Dustin called over his shoulder.

Steve didn’t speak again until he’d heard the front door shut and Nancy turn her music up. He said, “I just mean, like, the last few times you’ve been here you’ve been hung over? And it put you on edge? So I didn’t mean anything, like, bad.”

“That’s not what it sounded like.”

Billy’s jaw was clenched, his evening stubble blending in to the soft hair around his ears. Steve wiped his chest and adjusted his own glasses with his wrist. “It wasn’t supposed to sound like anything.”

“But it did.”

It didn’t matter what Steve had intended to say, and Steve knew that, but honestly, he was still sorting out where the words had come from, why they meant so much. If Billy were a patient man, Steve would have the time to collect himself, but Billy was not patient and Steve was not graceful. His mouth liked to run before his words knew how to walk. He said, “I’ve just—you drink a lot, is all.

“Wow, Harrington, great deduction skills, fucking A plus.”

Steve turned off his machine and set it down with a hard clang, met Billy’s snarling eyes with his own teeth as he snapped off his gloves. “Shit, sorry, I didn’t realize that dating you wasn’t supposed to include actually giving a fuck.”

“We’re dating?” Billy asked, teeth something venomous, something mean.

Steve kept his voice low as he ran a hand over his chin, crossed his arms and squeezed his elbows until he could feel the bones. “You said boyfriend first.”

Billy pinched his nose and sat up. “I- fuck, yeah, I did, but you were all weird about it, I figured it wasn’t, you know, your thing.”

“My thing?” Steve repeated. “What does that even mean?”

“Relationships and shit.”

The words stung more than they should, but knowing that didn’t make Steve’s hands shake any less as he took a deep breath and reminded himself that they would never get back the security deposit on the shop if someone had been murdered inside.

“Hargrove, if I was just looking for someone to mess around with, I sure as fuck wouldn’t have picked you.”

Billy’s mouth opened, but Steve was already starting to see the wounds behind his stormy eyes, could remember the second his expression changed like a thunderclap. Before Billy could shout, Steve said, “I fucking like you, okay? This is just all sort of weird, and like, fuck, I haven’t been in something solid in years. And never with a guy. I just meant I need to adjust before you get all big and dramatic on me. I’m stupid, but I want you.”

Two Door Cinema Club floated in the air between Steve’s silent machine and where Nancy sat one room over, ears close to her iPhone speaker as she worked. The woman on tv complained that the house had a finished basement but not her dream kitchen. Billy looked at Steve like he could read between the lines, or maybe like he was writing his own.

“You just think I need work,” Billy said, words sharp but slow.

Steve took a stilted breath, said, “I think we both need work.”

“You told anyone?”

“No.”

Billy waves his hand around. “Really? In a place like this? Figured all the little shits would have guessed it weeks ago.”

“Weeks ago?”

“You didn’t exactly keep your hands to yourself at that stag party.”

“We were drunk,” Steve hissed. “You flirted with Mike and told Jonathan he had the ass of a shapely piñata.”

“He does.”

“What does that even mean?”

Billy shrugged. “I don’t know, but it made sense, alright? And you wanted me to come back with you, and you wanted me in your bed, and I don’t know, to my friends, any one of those things would have been a big gay sign.”

“Jonathan was also in my bed.”

“And he has the ass of a shapely piñata.”

“Billy.” Steve closed his eyes and took a deep breath, tried to remember what he was mad about, what he had even started out defending. “They wouldn’t have guessed that. I’ve never *done* that.”

“You’ve never taken someone home?”

Steve waved a hand around the shop. “Not in an Uber full of drunk children.”

On the TV, the couple’s eldest daughter was walking through her renovated bedroom, complaining that her curtains were better before. Billy watched until the footage cut to her parents before he said, “So you’re not going to tell them?”

“Are we dating?”

Billy lay back on the bed and stared at the ceiling, fiddled with the thick ring on his left hand. Steve took that as a sign to pull on a fresh pair of gloves, was wiggling on the second one when Billy sighed and said, “Yes.”

Steve didn’t want to put up with Nancy’s bullshit today, felt too raw for her to judge his choices, but leaned forward and pressed his lips to Billy’s anyway, let Billy tangle his fingers in his hair, even though

Nancy could walk out, could see. Steve held his hands awkwardly at his sides as he tried to keep his gloves clean, but he wanted to touch the lines of Billy's abs, the muscle over his heart. He wanted to rest reverent fingers on Billy's shaking lungs and stop them from drifting apart.

Notes for the Chapter:

I'm a liar.

There's one more chapter after this.

7. maybe sprout wings

When the bell at the front of the shop rang, Billy was expecting some cursing, maybe Dustin saying something along the line of *shit, fuck, balancing everything in one tray in one hand is hard, doors are made by Satan, you asshole should come get your coffee*. What he got instead smart heels clicking softly against the hardwood and his step-sister huffing like she had better places to go, like she'd planned on doing a speed-run of Mass Effect 2 and this whole detour was fucking up her schedule. Which, it was the middle of the day, didn't she have a job? But Max came clacking into the back room with her arms crossed and said, "Oh shit," and Billy wasn't really on board with dealing with her, not when he was lying on his back with his boyfriend bent over his chest, needle running over his skin and cheeks still chapped from Steve's day-old stubble.

"Wow, good to see you too," Billy said. He tilted his head back until he could see his sister properly. Her hair was in a messy bun again and she had a red zip-up hoodie pulled around her business-casual black dress, the sweater sleeves pushed up to her elbows and her large purse crossed over her shoulder. She wasn't wearing any makeup. She looked like she'd been crying.

"Is Nancy here?" She asked, eyes on Steve, and Billy clenched his fists, tried to pretend that didn't sting like the needle running over his skin.

"She's in the workroom," Billy said, before Steve could even open his mouth. "The fuck do you want?"

Steve looked between Max and Billy and scrunched his mouth shut as he held his machine in the air and knocked the wires out of his way. It was great, really, because the last thing Billy needed was Steve sticking his neck out for Max's sharp tongue and bite-sized fury. Steve hadn't seen Max be cruel, probably not since that night in the Byers', the night she'd straightened her back and learned how to use her spine. It wouldn't be fair.

There weren't a lot of people who knew Max the way Billy did. Over the years they'd mellowed, learned to love each other's spite, but

sometimes it was a shoddy raft, held together by dental floss and a lot of misplaced love. Max rolled her eyes and pulled her purse over her head as she said, “Nothing, from you.”

“Why are you crying?”

“I’m not fucking crying.”

“Max,” Billy said, gruff, nearly growling.

“Jesus, I wouldn’t have come now if I knew you’d be here.”

Steve cleared his throat. “Should I go in to the other room?”

“No,” Max and Billy said at the same time. Max turned on her heel and threw her purse into one of the rolling chairs. She said, “I don’t have time for this.”

“Fuck you,” Billy called, but Max was already slamming the work room door behind her, her voice rising indistinguishably over Two Door Cinema Club as Nancy turned the music down.

Steve whistled and put the needle back to Billy’s skin. “What the fuck was that about?”

“None of your business.”

“Billy,” Steve said, “That whole caring thing? That’s this too. Just spill, Jesus.”

Billy glared at the ceiling as Steve worked, knew it was kind of shitty and stupid to hold back when Steve was being *logical*, but maybe that was why his other relationships hadn’t panned out, because the small, petty side of himself that wanted to punch walls also wanted to kick people back until they were out of his orbit.

“She’s being a bitch because of this fight I got in with my dad. Some of her grandmother’s plates got broken, which like, fine, but it wasn’t my fucking fault.”

Steve squinted his eyes. “I feel like that story is missing something.”

“Well, it’s fucking not,” Billy said. “Shut up, stop, I need to piss.”

Steve pulled back and turned off his machine before slamming it down on his cart a little too hard, like maybe it was the one ruining his tenuous domestic bliss ten minutes into their honeymoon period, and not Billy’s fucking step-sister. Billy wanted to hiss when Steve wiped his tattoo down but held his tongue. “Just wrap up my chest,” he said. “I’m going to need a smoke.”

Steve pulled out the cellophane and the medical tape, made quick work of a temporary wrap. If Billy saw his hands shaking, he didn’t say shit. It didn’t matter. Of course Steve was going to take Max’s side, like he had every other fucking time Billy had come to school slamming doors and pushing freshmen, like that wasn’t some kind of fucking sign.

Steve pulled off his gloves and ran a hand through his hair as Billy stomped into the bathroom off to the side.

Billy clutched the raised glass sink basin and tried to find his center, before deciding even that was bullshit. He pissed, washed his hands, and checked his pockets for his smokes, and wasn’t that just amazing, he’d left his lighter who the fuck knew where, probably in his kitchen, like a dumbass.

So he banged into the main room again to find Steve with his glasses in his hair, posture slumped and arms crossed over his chest as he watched a man on TV complain that he’d never really understood colour composition. His husband had let him paint all the walls seafoam.

“Any idea where I can get a lighter?” Billy asked.

Steve seemed to think a second before fishing around in his pockets and tossing one to Billy. “I found it on my coffee table yesterday. Meant to give it back.”

“Thanks,” Billy said, but Steve was already engrossed in the TV, probably trying to decide if the seafoam was tacky or gave the house a beachy vibe, like that somehow mattered.

Billy rolled his eyes and shoved his way outside, the door snapping harshly shut behind him. He'd left his shirt on the chair Max had thrown her purse on, but it was warm enough that he didn't mind the breeze ghosting over his nipples as he leaned against the cold bricks and held his cigarette to his lips.

Chicago was getting sluggish as the weather turned warm, people already trying to take lingering catnaps under sunny skies. Under the wrappings, Billy's chest burned.

A few minutes later, the shop door opened again, spitting Steve out into the street. The sun hit his hair at just the right angle, his dark brown coif glowing gold between the graying buildings. Billy wanted to kiss him, wanted to punch himself for even thinking it, and wasn't that a mood.

"Give me one," Steve said, leaning against the wall beside him.

"I didn't know you smoked."

Steve rolled his shoulders and ran a hand over his lips. "I quit last year. Just give me one."

"Nancy's going to say I'm corrupting you."

"It's just one, Jesus," Steve said, holding a hand out, and Billy shook one out of the package. Billy cupped the smoke to Steve's lips in silence, lit it like a ritual. Steve held the cigarette between his fingers and held his breath for a long time before letting the smoke escape with a gasp.

"Fuck," he said, "I miss this."

"No shit?" Billy took a drag and let it out slow. "What do you want?"

"I know fuck-all," Steve said, tapping off the ash and watching it float in the wind. "I don't really know about your parents, or whatever. Just that I've heard they're awful, you know? So like, I'm sorry, I didn't mean that to come out that way."

"I thought we were supposed to trust each other or whatever?"

“Yeah,” Steve shrugged. “I’m sorry.”

“Yeah, you fucking should be.”

Billy watched the cars and let the smoke hang in his lungs, held it until it burned. Sometimes he missed the peace of Hawkins, all the birds and green grass and how easy it was to trek out into the woods, find some way to disappear in a way security cameras and dog walkers couldn’t allow on a city street.

Steve looked up at the clouds and said, “You should probably talk to Max. Like, I don’t know how to help.”

“It’s not your problem.”

“It is,” Steve paused, took a drag. “It is.”

That thought took a while to digest, long enough for Billy’s cigarette to burn down to the filter. He dropped it and stomped it out with his foot. “Fine.”

“Cool,” Steve said. Not that it was actually cool. Who the fuck was Steve kidding?

The shop was quiet when Billy stepped back in, no TV or music or Nancy murmuring words of encouragement. Billy walked across the floor like he’d crept between the kitchen and his bedroom as a child, hoping his father wouldn’t notice he was up. He realized he was holding his breath, which was fucking stupid. He was just going to see Max. It was no big deal, drops in the ocean.

“Yo,” he said, poking his head in to the room. Max was sitting with her head in her hands and Nancy squeezing her shoulder, concern written on her face.

“What do you want, Billy?” Nancy asked, eyebrows dipping even further as she raised her hackles for a fight.

Billy shook his head and pushed the door a bit wider. “Just to talk. You know, with my sister?” When Nancy didn’t answer he slapped his thighs. “For fuckssake, I’m not going to scream at her, just get out and give me like, ten minutes.”

Wiping her eyes, Max lifted her head enough to nod at Nancy, who seemed hesitant but nodded in return. “Just call if you need me,” Nancy said, but Billy could tell by the set of Max’s shoulders that that wasn’t going to happen. As Nancy left, Max leaned over to turn the music back on.

“What do you want?”

“What’s *wrong* with you?” Billy asked, and the way he said it was definitely the wrong way to say it, but Max looked at the ceiling like she knew, like she understood all his splintery sharp parts, and maybe she did. She shrugged.

“Lucas is just, you know,” She said. “He got my name tattooed on him and it’s like, too much.”

“Max, you’ve been together since you were like fourteen. That’s like, forever ago. Practically unheard of.”

“Tommy and Carol have been together longer.”

“Tommy and Carol’s relationship is pretty fucked,” Billy said. He flipped one of the rolling chairs backwards and sat on it with his legs on either side, let the seat cradle his chest and hold him steady.

“I think he wants to get married. I don’t know.”

“Isn’t that a good thing?”

Most people wanted to get married, as far as Billy knew. His last girlfriend had wanted a gold band until Muscles had kissed Billy in the ring, had thrown everything she’d understood out the window. Even if he didn’t start things, didn’t ask for that kiss, he’d had some explaining to do. Somehow *bisexual* and *unfaithful* meant the same thing in her vocabulary, and Billy’d grown smart enough to know that, to keep the men of his past a hushed topic until it was blasted in his face. He’d kind of wanted to marry her, too, at one point. What a dodged bullet.

Max tucked a loose hair behind her ear and shrugged. She’d pulled down the sleeves of her sweater, making her look thirteen and shy. “I’m only twenty,” she said. “It’s just too soon, you know? Mom and

dad got married young and I watched them get divorced, and it just seems so-”

“Messy?” Billy offered.

“Yeah,” Max said. “I don’t know. I’m not ready. Mom wasn’t ready with dad. I don’t want to do that shit. Or like, put anyone else through it. Kids or whatever. I was so mad when mom met Neil, like, what the fuck? I hated him.”

Something solid formed in Billy’s belly and shifted up until it pressed into his lungs, made him feel hot and suffocated, reminded him of his back hitting a china cabinet. “That the *only* reason you hated him?”

Max squeezed her fingers and stared at her nylon socked feet. Her shoes were forgotten under Nancy’s drawing table, like maybe she’d wanted to stop being an adult, stop feeling the weight of the world under her feet long enough to breathe. Billy wished it were that easy to strip his skin. The traces of his past were carved into every limb.

“And for the shit he does to you,” Max said softly.

The gurgle of laughter that sprung from Billy’s throat was surprising, caught him off-guard like a stray Frisbee thrown too violently at the beach. “That’s not what you were saying before.”

“I was mad.”

“No,” Billy said, laughter cutting short. “You were a fucking bitch.”

Max nodded like that was fair, like she’d spent a lot of time thinking about fine china and Billy’s broken bones. The look on her face pressed that heavy lump in Billy’s gut harder, morphed the shape of it until it had sharp edges. Max took a deep breath and said, “My grandmother didn’t leave a lot behind. I’m sorry. I know that was like, really shitty.”

Billy hung his head over the front of the chair and rubbed his chin. “Sorry I punched Neil.”

“No you’re not.”

“Nah,” Billy agreed, “I’m not.”

Max twisted her chair a little, let her shoulders relax. “I’ve missed you.”

“It’s okay. I’ll still be one of your bridesmaids.”

“Groomsmen.”

“Maid of honour.”

“Shut the fuck up,” Max laughed. “Jane is maid of honour. And I’m not getting married.”

“Yet.”

“Nancy!” Max called, “Nancy, Billy is bullying me!”

Street sounds filtered into the gym in the early evening while Billy sat next to the open window with his back to the wall, feeling the clean sweat cool on his skin. He held his phone and cleared his messages, cleared his voicemails, wiped any missed calls. Then, with still thoughts and his cheek pinched between his teeth, he changed his ring tone.

The gray Steve helped pick for Billy’s bedroom was thin and runny. It filled the whole apartment with sharp, perfumey chemical smells that made Billy’s eyes water and his nose itch. That’s what they got for being skimpy and buying the cheap shit, zero quality in something so cloying. Billy stretched up on his toes to reach his paint roller to the ceiling, maybe flexed a little more than he needed so Steve could see every vein and muscle on his bare chest.

The weather outside was getting warmer by the day, sudden heat spells sweeping the city one moment before plunging back to jacket weather the next. Steve had all the windows open to try air out the room. He wore just shorts like Billy, although Billy’s were dark and well fitted while Steve’s were floral. Steve had his hair tucked back in

a small bun to keep the heat away from his neck, and Billy now understood why girls used to love his hair, used to make comments about how good Billy looked with stray curls stuck to his skin as he threw his punches.

Billy wanted to press his fingers into Steve's bare ribs. He wanted to make him sing.

"Dude, you're getting paint everywhere," Steve said, chucking his own roller into the paint tray. "Watch out, you're going to fuck up the laminate. Your landlord is going to throw a fucking fit."

"Please, he won't know."

"He will when you move," Steve said, pointing at the wall. "This, we can change. The floors? No way."

Billy looked at the can of black paint next to the covered up bed and raised an eyebrow. Billy wanted the whole room black, but Steve said just the back wall was the best way to go, he'd heard somewhere that it was a good way to give the room depth.

With one hand, Billy spun his roller in a lazy circle, his hands already covered in so much gray that he didn't give a fuck about keeping them clean. "How soon do you think I'm moving, exactly? Because this is like, a lot of work for a useless project."

Steve shrugged. "You wanted to paint, not me."

"Dude, like, don't judge."

"I'm not," Steve said, sitting on the drop cloth next to the paint tray with his legs out and his arms spread back behind him. "I like it, actually. I think this room'll suit you more." He wiggled the wrecked Converse on his feet. If Billy were more sentimental, he would have taken a picture. As he was, he kind of wanted to take one anyway.

"Yeah, I think so," Billy said. "I don't know. I like it here. It's a good spot."

"It is," Steve agreed with a wink. "And not just because it's close to me."

Billy dropped his paint roller into the tray and took a seat beside Steve, bumping their shoulders together as he rolled the tacky half-dried paint into balls between his palms. "Shit, you know, that's exactly why I picked it when I moved here. I said, you know what? Some dumb fucks from Hawkins are probably going to move here too so I should set up shop right where they'll be in like, three years."

"It's like fate."

Billy snorted. "You think fate is bullshit."

"Yeah," Steve said, but he leaned in pressed a chaste kiss to Billy's lips, smiled against his rough cheek in a way that made Billy's veins shudder. "You have paint on your arm."

"You've got paint on your everywhere."

"Those are my *tattoos*--" But Billy wasn't listening, too busy slapping his hand in the paint tray and running it down the middle of Steve's chest. Steve spluttered and pushed him back, mouth open as he took in the large smear of gray coating the script and roses on his belly, the bear on his chest. "What the fuck?"

"That's more like the pasty kid I remember."

Steve slapped his own hand in the paint tray and got up on his knees. "So it's going to be like that?" he asked, shouting over Billy's laughs. "Then let's fucking go, bitch!"

Billy crashed back into the covered dresser as Steve wrapped his mucky hand around the back of Billy's neck, grinned with wonder at the gorgeous monster straddling his hips, marking his skin. Steve's was hot under Billy's hands, waist slick with paint and summertime sweat, ribs heaving as he laughed and pressed his lips to Billy's.

A fan rattled in the corner of the room, silent compared to Billy's breath as Steve ran his hand down Billy's chest. The handcuffs on Billy's other pec were still healing, itchy and rough to the touch, flaking as the shredded skin got rid of the old to expose the new. Billy kissed Steve's neck and rolled their hips together, laughed when Steve ran a line of gray over his cheek.

“Bitch,” Steve muttered, so Billy kissed him until he was gasping.

They had to shower for half an hour, scrub their hands and necks raw to get all the paint off. Billy’s fingernails were still caked in paint as he sat on the couch with Steve resting between his legs, old school *Power Rangers* on TV while Billy ran his hands through Steve’s hair.

“You bought more picture frames.”

“Well yeah,” Billy said. “I had to do something with that stack Max threw at me after she saw the one by the TV.”

“They look good,” Steve said, twisting around enough to give Billy a kiss. Everything about Steve smelled fresh and warm, even with the lingering paint still stuck in his hair, making him look gray before his time. Or maybe those were early gray hairs and Steve would be salt and pepper before his thirties, a silver fox by forty. Maybe that would be hot. Maybe Billy would like that.

Billy ghosted his fingers down Steve’s arm and slipped his hand under his shirt, covered his bellybutton with his palm. “You look better,” he said.

Steve wiggled around until he could squint at Billy, mouth open, and said, “That’s fucking corny, even from you. How did you even get girls before this? Seriously, I want to know. That was some low-brow as shit flirting there.”

Through the protests, Billy grinned and traced lazy circles on Steve’s abdomen. Then he slipped the hand into Steve’s borrowed shorts and nuzzled his cheek. “It’s about confidence-- giving just enough to make them want.”

“Christ,” Steve said, but he rocked his dick into Billy’s firm hand, wore a crinkle in his dimples that dared Billy to stop. “You’re like a badly written TV character. I think I gave Dustin that speech in high school.”

“Did he use it?”

“I don’t know,” Steve said. “I didn’t think to ask.”

Something about Steve being seventeen and handing out sex advice made Billy’s groin pulse, made his dick hot and heavy between his thighs. The distance between their skin had always been dizzying when Billy wanted those birthmarks under his tongue, those fingers between his legs.

“What would you tell him now?”

“What, you need advice?”

“Like hell.”

Steve smiled and rubbed Billy through his sweatpants. “I’d tell him to be patient, but think with his dick.”

“That sounds like shit advice.”

“Yeah, but it got me fucked *way* more often.”

Billy laughed, sound hitched in the middle when Steve ungracefully tugged down his pants to wrap his fingers around Billy’s cock. “And what advice would you give me, since you’re just spouting wisdom?”

After a pause, Steve licked Billy’s mouth, pressed him into a kiss that made him feel like he was diving. He kept his eyes closed when Steve bit his bottom lip, breathed heavily against Steve’s stubble as he said, “I’d tell you to get on your knees.”

The insides of Steve’s shorts were slick with precum, his dick hard and thick under Billy’s hand. It was a bit of a struggle, but Billy rolled himself over Steve and on to the floor, very narrowly missing the coffee table in the process. It would have been worth the busted shin. He needed to shake some of the fire in his blood, the wild under his skin.

Steve tangled sticky fingers in Billy’s hair and braced himself against the couch to help slip his shorts down to his ankles, needy cock bobbing free. “See? It works,” he teased.

“Shut the fuck up,” Billy said, but it was stupid, really fucking stupid,

because the next moment Steve was moaning, head tilted back as Billy licked up his shaft and took him into his mouth.

“Fuck,” Steve whined. “Billy, baby, not that this isn’t fantastic, but I want to fuck you. Seriously, can I fuck you?”

And shit, that was *way* better, as far as Billy was concerned. He pulled back quickly, almost wobbling back into the table again as he wiped his mouth. “Condoms and lube are in the left-side drawer.”

Steve fucking ran, smashed his leg on the armrest, practically toppled the standing lamp as Billy threw an elbow up on the table and laughed.

“Are you coming?” Steve called.

“We’re not sleeping in there!” Billy replied, tugging his shirt over his head. “It smells like shit. Come here.”

“On the floor?”

“It wouldn’t be the first time.”

When Billy glanced up again, Steve was in the doorway with one hand on the wood, the other clenching the lube. “Fuck,” he said.

Billy twisted around and pushed the coffee table out of the way as he said, “Yeah, that’s kind of the point, trying to get there.”

“You talk too much.”

“You like that I talk too much.”

“Yeah,” Steve said. He settled behind Billy and lightly touched his back before clearing his throat. “Get on your knees?”

This time, Billy knew exactly what Steve meant, was more than willing to plant his hands firmly on the floor and arch his back. He could hear packaging crackle, nearly said something else when Steve roughly grabbed his ass and squeezed, the fingers on one hand slippery and promising, enticing enough for Billy to rock his hips back in their direction.

"I was not this mean to you," he said.

"Recently or historically?" Steve asked. He laughed, breathy and hot against Billy's back as he finally pushed a finger in, started to move it like maybe he'd been doing research, and fuck, wasn't that a thought that sent shocks up Billy's spine, had him rolling his hips and dropping to his elbows.

"Recently," Billy hissed.

Steve seemed to consider, hummed, said, "I suppose." Then added another finger, another, had Billy swearing by the time he reached for a condom and rolled it on.

They moved in jagged fits and bursts, Steve's thighs slapping Billy's ass as they struggled for the right rhythm. Billy wiggled a hand under himself and tugged his dripping dick in time with his jerking hips, moaned when Steve ran his teeth down his back, sharp canines ripping bloodlines by his spine.

When they were both spent, Billy pulled Steve's head on to his chest and stared at the cracks in his ceiling, whistled low as he wondered, "Yo', do you think we should paint the ceilings in here too?"

The floor, apparently, was not as good as the bed, something Steve made strong arguments about approximately twenty minutes into lying on Billy's hard laminate floor, their delicate backs only protected by a thin area rug. Billy thought he was just being a little bitch, but like, whatever, Steve didn't need that kind of negativity in his life. He was speeding through his twenties, his bad back was already starting to creep up on him, and he couldn't find a good enough reason to martyr himself when there was a perfectly good bed sitting in the next room.

Did the room smell disgustingly of paint? Yes, but Steve was willing to look at the situation as a win-some lose-some, and his back was not the some he was willing to lose.

"This is disgusting."

“Then open the window wider.”

“It’s already open as wide as it will go.”

“Then turn the fan higher.”

“But it’s so *far*.”

“Billy.”

“*Steve*.”

Steve had known Billy could be a child, had seen it plenty of times when Billy was spitting through his teeth or spinning his wheels, but he’d never realized how fucking endearing it could be, how much he liked petulant bitching when it came from a serpent tongue tucked behind angel lips. He hit Billy’s side of the bed and whined, “You’re fucking impossible.”

“You’re a fucking brat.”

Which, actually, was fair. Steve kicked the sheets off his body and lay in the cooling early evening, sighed at the ceiling. Maybe that’s why he liked Billy. Maybe he wanted the world at his fingertips too, sick to death of being his own inconvenience.

“You know, you don’t have to be here. You could go sleep on the floor by yourself.”

Billy shook his head and wiggled one arm out from under the blankets to wrap it around Steve’s waist. He said, “I’m already here now.”

Steve wanted to scream. Instead, he settled for rolling on his side and pulling Billy’s arm until Billy was flush against his back, his heat better than any covers in the lukewarm dark, his bare chest a roaring furnace. Steve wondered where the anvil on Billy’s chest sat in relation to his own heart, if the healing handcuffs would lock themselves to his skin.

“Hey,” Steve said softly. “I think we should have a dinner party.”

"We should have a what?" Billy asked. "Dustin was right. You're a goddamn soccer mom."

"Shut up," Steve said. "Last time Nancy threw one Will got so drunk that he proposed to Mike. We're not classy enough for a four course meal and charades."

"Clearly," Billy said, breath tickling the sweat-slicked hairs stuck to Steve's neck. "Did Mike say yes?"

"Nah, Eleven would have killed him, and if she didn't, her sister is a psycho bitch. Mike would be roadkill."

Steve shifted, trying to find the right place to put his arms so they'd line up with Billy's fingertips, but Billy's arm was no longer around his waist. The blankets slipped down Billy's chest as he sat up, something mean on his mouth when Steve rolled on to his back to meet his eyes. "Fuck you, man," Billy said. "Kali's *my* psycho bitch. You can't talk about my friends like that."

And honestly, Steve felt like he was sinking in quicksand as clarity and remembrance hit him like a wall. Steve opened his mouth, hoped maybe some saving grace would tumble from his lips if he kept them open long enough, but all that met his tongue were paint fumes.

Billy ran a hand through his hair and stared at the drying wall, gripped his own jaw for so long that Steve wondered if it hurt, wondered if Billy knew his face was always art. The city lights were too bright, so Steve closed his eyes and clenched his fists as he licked his lips and finally said, "We should invite her to our dinner party."

Billy laughed, thick and dry. "Yeah? Who else? Obama?"

"I was thinking more like Carol, Tommy, maybe Nancy and Jonathan?"

Billy hit his pillow and flopped back at Steve's side. "Good luck."

"We could host it here."

"No. Just- no one is going to come, alright?"

It was Steve's turn to prop up on his elbows and give Billy a proper look, the kind that involved leaning over until he could reclaim the sun on Billy's skin, place a tentative hand on his ramshackle heart. He'd learned how to take a nip from bared teeth, was getting pretty good at learning what made them bite.

"Fine," Steve said. "We'll host it at mine. Say it's mine."

"And what?" Billy asked. "No one thinks it's weird that we're both there? That you invited only my stupid friends?"

"Awe," Steve cooed, voice sugar sweet. "Nancy and Jonathan are your friends already?"

Billy shoved his chest hard enough to make Steve wobble, but it didn't wipe the grin from Steve's face, didn't stop him from saying, "Come on, it's time for everyone to get over their shit."

"Maybe I don't want to."

"Maybe I don't care."

Billy rolled his eyes and tugged Steve down, pressed his nose into Steve's hair like the smell would drown out the toxins in the air, the chemicals Steve thought might be making him lightheaded and alive. There was a broken mirror in Billy's closet, the frame left with a few shards hanging around the edges while the rest of the glass lingered in a shoebox tucked between boxes of real shoes. When Steve saw it, he kind of wanted to glue it back together.

"Fine," Billy mumbled. "But Axel better bring some top shelf apology-wine. Motherfucker busted my leg."

"No."

"Kali--"

"No," She said again. Something banged on her end of the line that made Steve wince.

“Listen,” Steve said, “I know Billy can be a dick. Like, the biggest fucking dick I’ve ever met. The guy puts cologne on his pubes. Who the fuck does that? And he puts empty cereal boxes back in the cupboard. Like Satan. But he can also be a damn good guy sometimes, and I’m begging you, please come to dinner.”

The thing was, Steve thought he actually had a pretty solid plan when he’d sat down on the couch in the front room of Upside-Down Tattoos , finger poised over Kali’s number in his work contacts list. Then he’d opened his unfaithful mouth and dropped Billy’s name like an anchor through a ship deck and all his ideas started quickly gaining water.

The sun was setting low over the city, panting the windows and walls in dense oranges and reds as Steve held his breath. He bit his tongue and listened to Kali breathe down the line. He’d always been a little afraid of her, thought it was a pretty valid instinct from the way she squinted behind thick eyeliner and stomped around in boots heavier than her own body weight. It made a lot of sense that she was Billy’s friend. She seemed like someone grounding.

“Why do you care?” She finally asked.

“I said he was my boyfriend--”

“Yeah, but why? He’s said something about you like, once. And it wasn’t good.”

Steve tucked his phone between his shoulder and his ear and rubbed his hands together. “We kind of fucked up as teenagers, but we’re on the same page now. I know my word like, doesn’t mean all that much, but he misses you.”

Kali was silent for a beat, long enough for Steve to think he’d overstepped, not that his phone call hadn’t already. Billy had tried three times and it had gone to voicemail. Eventually, he’d given up. Steve’s call wasn’t expected, was actually sort of an ambush, and once he had Kali on the line he wasn’t going to let go.

“I might come,” She said. “Don’t hold your breath.”

Well, that was good enough. "I'm making stuffed mushrooms," he said. "You know, if that helps."

"Hey, Nance."

"Steve," Nancy said, a little breathless, like she'd been running. "Hey. I just got off the plane. You wouldn't *believe* who just gave me a tattoo in Seattle. No, no, I'm not telling you. I want you to see it and guess. God, the convention was so good, you should have come."

"Dude, I would have, but I was completely booked up this week," Steve said, swivelling in his chair behind the front desk. "I don't know where all this traffic is coming from, honestly. I was going to go until I was booked two months out and realized that it would be better if I opened up this week. People are already coming from Seattle to see me here, like, I don't understand what's going on."

Wind hissed over the phone line as Nancy murmured a thank-you to someone, before a car door slammed and the line went quiet. Just when Steve thought the call had been dropped, Nancy said, "You don't follow Billy on Instagram, do you?"

"Do you?"

"Well, yeah," Nancy said. "He posts all your stuff on there. He even tags you. You're terrible at this."

"Hey," Steve said, "To be fair, I've been getting swamped with notifications lately."

"You're a heartless, cruel monster. You probably don't even have him on Facebook."

Steve had spent hours the night before with his mouse cursor hovered over Billy's profile, his glasses slipping down his nose and his hand in his hair as he tried to decide whether or not he wanted to ask Billy to change his relationship status. It had been a rough call. Steve felt a little like a teenage girl with an early crush, like he'd felt when Nancy had texted him a series of hearts and asked if she could make them official, like the internet was social marriage for the young and

potentially in love.

“I do,” He said. He’d decided not to change his status. He wasn’t ready to be a WAG. “I’m not seventy-five. You know how I am on Instagram.”

“Anyway,” Nancy said something to the driver before clearing her throat, “His posts have been blowing up. I genuinely didn’t realize how popular he was. He has a ton of followers. Like, I’m not surprised you’re being booked up.”

“But none of them have said anything.” At least, as far as he was aware. Shit, maybe he just wasn’t listening. A woman last week had definitely asked him if he watched wrestling and he’d been horribly embarrassed to admit that he knew shit-all.

“I don’t know what to tell you,” Nancy said.

“Well, okay,” Steve said, lightly kicking the underside of the front desk as he tried to recover. “Speaking of Billy, I’m having a dinner party on Saturday. Carol, Tommy, you and Jonathan. Kali and Axel might show.”

“Kali and Axel?” Nancy asked, and Steve didn’t have to see her face to know how her mouth was pursed and her brows pinched. She probably had her hair up in a ponytail. She’d always looked beautiful in a ponytail.

“Yeah. Apparently they’re like, Billy’s best friends? Like, how fucking small is Chicago?”

That wasn’t a good enough answer for Nancy. Steve had no illusions that it was going to be, but he liked to pretend that things could be easy sometimes. Optimism was mostly encouraged in small doses. She said, “I get Billy, but like, why do you care about his friends?”

“Carol and Tommy are also his friends. Or were.”

“Yeah, but they’re also your friends.”

Steve took a deep breath and stared at the ceiling, swiveled the chair with his toes around the leg braces. “You guys kept telling me to try

guys.”

“Steve.”

“I just followed your advice.”

“Steve.”

“Don’t give me that voice. He can actually be really nice. Or well, okay, it’s Billy, he can be really nice in like, intermittent bursts, but he’s almost always nice to me. And he’s so hot, Nancy, like, wow, why were we not having sex in the locker room showers in high school hot.”

“Because he was psychotic and nearly killed you?”

“Only once.”

Nancy sighed one of her deep, soul baring sighs, the ones that made Steve fall a little bit in love with her again, just for a second, before he reeled that ache back in and reminded himself how she looked as a bride, how she looked tucked tight under Jonathan’s arm with their twin smiles blooming like early flowers. “I promise that he’s different,” he said.

“I don’t like him.”

“I do. Please come to dinner? It would mean a lot to him. To me.”

He could hear a car honk distantly down the line and imagined Nancy gripping the car door as the cab careened around the corner, her knuckles white and red with concern, although he wasn’t sure for what.

“I’m bringing white wine,” she said.

“Good. I’ve got Fireball.”

“You’re trash.”

“I love you too.”

Kali wasn't even over the threshold before she was slugging Billy in the arm, her teeth grit under black lipstick and her eyes alive. "Fuck you," she said.

Billy pointed a finger at her chest, very near to stabbing her right under her clavicle before Steve grabbed his shoulder. Billy dropped his arm and balled his hands up at his sides, calm for all the bubbling madness Steve could see rolling in his tense shoulders. "Thanks for coming," Billy said. It wasn't perfect, but it was something.

"Come on in." Steve pulled Billy back a pace with his knuckles that read *home*. "Everyone else is in the living room already."

"We brought cake," Axel said over Kali's head. He held the pan aloft as he kicked off his boots and let them hit the wall. Steve thought maybe he should be angry about that, but his Converse lay haphazard in the pile of shoes lining the scuffed bricks. Still, it was his house. At least a small part of him was allowed to be a hypocrite.

"Thanks," Billy said, moving around his friend to grab the cake. "We've got drinks in the kitchen too, and little quiches and stuff on the coffee table."

"Fuck me up," Kali said, stepping into the open kitchen and immediately gravitating to the bottle of wine on the counter. "Steve, good call."

"Actually, that one's all Nancy," Steve said with his head half in the oven. Billy leaned against the counter at Steve's side with his arms crossed and something Steve couldn't read creasing his mouth.

Nancy waved from the couch as Kali waved back with the bottle. "Why don't we ever hang out?" Kali asked. "We should totally hang out."

"You pick the date, I'll bring the wine," Nancy promised, although Steve couldn't tell how genuine it was, a little preoccupied with resting a hand on Billy's waist and searching his eyes.

Something about the moment felt a long time coming, like a

concussion in the ocean building a slow-rolling tsunami or a tree's roots spilling deep into an underground cave. Steve touched an old cigarette burn on Billy's inner arm and knew its maker, was starting to learn all the lines of Billy's body, all the ink on his skin and scars in his veins. He couldn't read Billy's mind, knew he never would, but liked to think he might catalogue the outsides, learn their dressings like a drunk, fumbling cartographer with a faulty compass.

"Stop that," Billy said, but he breathed in a way he hadn't in a while, in a way that made his shoulders high. Steve wanted to take that helium, taste it on his tongue.

"What?" he asked.

"You know what," Billy said, but put a hand on Steve's shoulder.

"I really don't. You're going to have to spell it out for me. All this cooking by myself, you know, leaning over this hot stove while you just vacuumed the floors for two hours has me seeing ghosts a little bit, like, shit, what year is it? Maybe I have heat stroke. You should--"

Billy kissed him quick, blinking eyes between Steve and their company like he dared them to say something, like they weren't preoccupied by Jonathan's fucking weird collection of untraditional honeymoon photographs.

"You went to a fish farm?" Tommy asked as Billy kissed Steve again, soft and easy.

Nancy shrugged. "We've been thinking about going vegan. Thought it might be cool research. Carol, you said you might try it with us, didn't you?"

"Thank you," Billy said.

The disgust from the couch was probably Tommy. "No way, I didn't sign up for that."

"It's pretty easy," Axel said. Glass clinked like he was filling drinks. "I could give you recipes."

“Could you?” Nancy asked. “We just want to try it for like, a week, then see if we can stick with it. New marriage, new us and all that.”

“I don’t know why you’re thanking me,” Steve said to Billy. “This was a fucking terrible idea.”

Carol clapped her hands. “Guys, stop eye-fucking in the kitchen.”

“I’m not eating rabbit food,” Tommy groused.

“Don’t be an idiot,” Kali said. “Rabbits don’t eat tofu or hot sauce.”

Billy pulled off Steve’s glasses and set them on the kitchen counter, kissing the letters looping *sick* over Steve’s hand before he said, “Start pouring shots. They get along better if they’re drunk.”

“Well no shit, they’re your friends,” Steve said. Billy, gorgeous Billy, with light eyes and devilish lips, just smiled.

By the end of the night, Steve had a new Jonathan-shaped hole in his wall, pink and black lipstick kisses on his cheeks, and a boxer in his bed, pressed tightly to his arm, bringing him home.

Notes for the Chapter:

Well, this is it. I’m both proud and literally sobbing. This has been such a joy to write and I’m so thrilled by everyone who has been there to support me along the way. I really couldn’t have done this without you. If this were a movie award I’d be thanking you guys, not Jesus.

Any and all feedback is monumentally appreciated, and please, come talk to me! I’m over on Tumblr @eternalgoldfish and I’m super friendly, I promise.

And finally,

The title and chapter titles are from *Maybe Sprout Wings* by The Mountain Goats.